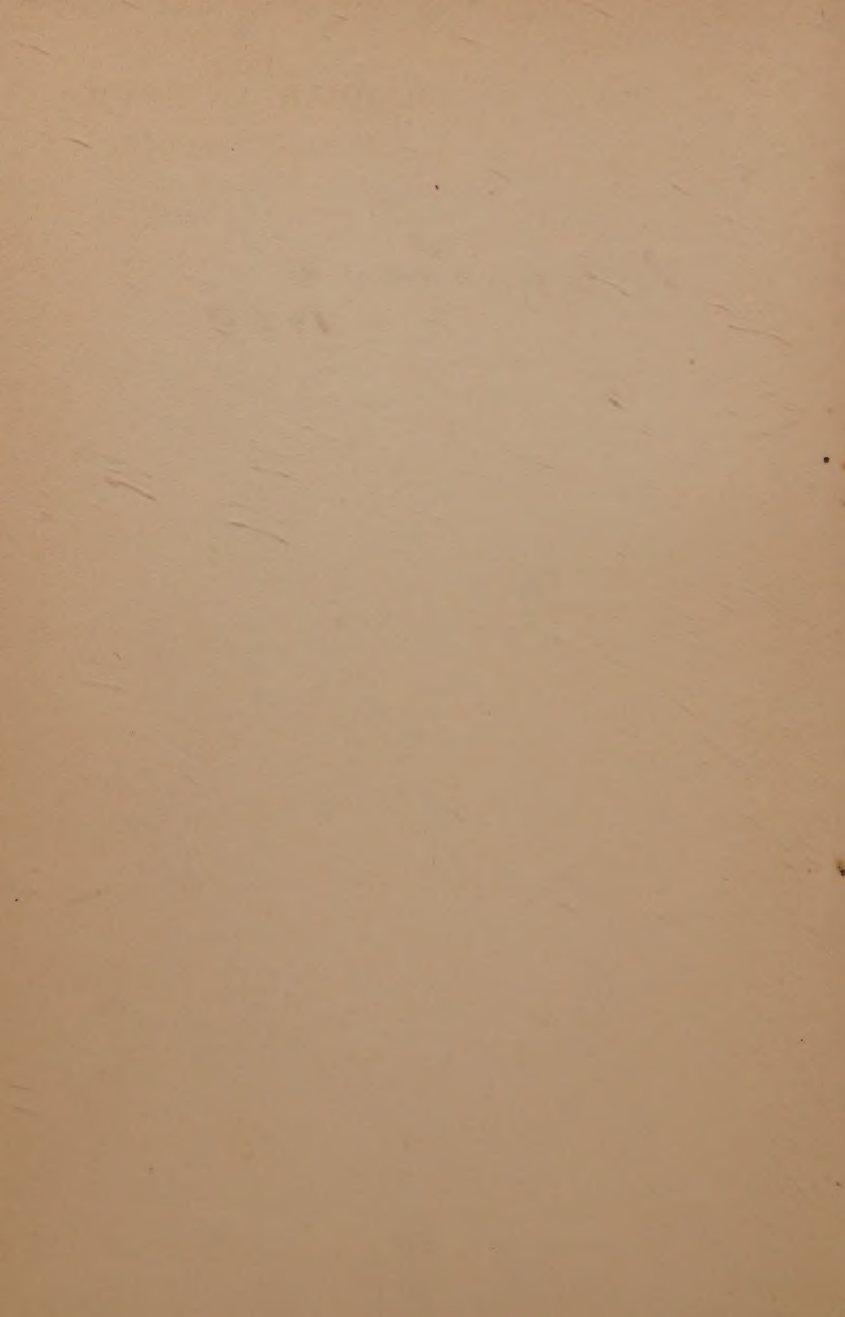


THE
BARBARIAN
LOVER
MARGARET
PEDLER

Gerald J. Elbert
12.3.77

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1924.



THE
BARBARIAN LOVER

MARGARET PEDLER

By

MARGARET PEDLER

THE BARBARIAN LOVER

THE VISION OF DESIRE

THE MOON OUT OF REACH

THE LAMP OF FATE

THE SPLENDID FOLLY

THE HERMIT OF FAR END

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

NEW YORK:

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

THE BARBARIAN LOVER

BY
MARGARET PEDLER

NEW  YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE BARBARIAN LOVER. II

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THE BARBARIAN LOVER

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CHAPTER I

THE COMMISSIONER'S "MYSTERY MAN"

"**T**HE beauty of India is its climate," remarked Patricia succinctly.

Stewart Luttrell came out of his newspaper with a jerk and regarded his daughter with pardonable astonishment. The Indian climate is not usually considered a subject for rejoicing by those compelled to dwell in it.

"It's not the hot weather, or I should be inclined to think you were suffering from a touch of the sun," he returned mildly, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. It was thanks to that twinkle, never very far distant from the Commissioner's pleasant grey eyes, that affairs, both social and departmental, ran with such comparative smoothness at Coomara.

"I'm talking excellent sense," retorted Patricia. "The weather may do all sorts of diabolical things here—but at least we do know beforehand what it's going to do! In the rainy season it rains——"

"Like the very deuce it does!" interpolated Luttrell with a grimace of reminiscence.

She nodded and continued.

"And in the hot weather there's no mistake about the heat. But at this time of year one can be really sure of a lovely sunny day and can give a garden-party without any of the awful preliminary qualms which an English hostess has to undergo."

"True," he assented. "I suppose the weather does tend to worry people at Home."

"I should think it does!"—with fervour. "I remember when we used to give our annual garden-party at school, the head invariably planned out a double set of arrangements—one programme based on the possibility of its being a fine day and another upon which to retire if it should turn out wet—as it generally did!—and all the parents have to be entertained indoors. Just imagine the horror of it if I had to chance crowding half Coomara indoors this afternoon! And think, too, of the anxiety about one's clothes! I've got an absolute dream of a frock for to-day, incidentally," she added, nodding. "Just sent out from England!"

The Commissioner glanced at his watch and jumped up hastily.

"It's about time you put it on, too!" he exclaimed. "I'd no idea it was so late. We shall have people arriving before we're ready to receive them! Come on, Pat."

She, too, sprang to her feet, alarmed to discover how near the time had drawn to the hour fixed for the Residency garden-party. That the Commissioner's bungalow was dignified by the title of "Residency" was owing to the fact that it had been originally the dwelling-place of a British Resident, maintained there in former days before Coomara became incorporated in British India. Patricia had a sneaking affection for the name—somehow it seemed to her to suit the beautifully proportioned building with its pillared entrance and stately background of gorgeous garden.

"We shall have to hurry," she announced. "Run along quick and make yourself beautiful, Sahib darling." She invariably addressed him as "Sahib" when out of earshot of the native servants. As a child she had acquired the word from her *ayah*, and had promptly converted it to her own use as a special appellation for her father, entirely refusing to adopt any more conventional form of address, and now it

had come to be accepted between them as a little intimate nickname that "understood itself."

"Just come and look at yourself in the glass," she added peremptorily.

She dragged him towards a long panel mirror let into the wall, and he obediently bent his gaze on the reflection it gave back. It showed a tall, long-limbed man, with slightly stooping shoulders and the sallow skin of one who has lived long beneath the burning suns of India. He had a finely shaped head, crowned by a rumpled thatch of reddish hair, fast turning grey. The face was thin and eager, with a network of tiny lines etched about the eyes, while the mouth closed in an oddly composite expression of sadness and humour and severity.

The mirror revealed small resemblance betwixt the Commissioner and his daughter. She had all the fine slenderness of her mother, together with the latter's glowing colouring. There were the same dark, shining hair and gentian blue eyes—blue eyes "put in with a smutty finger" that were a tribute to some far-away intermingling of Irish blood—and a skin of which, in some miraculous way, she had contrived to preserve the fine grain and texture in defiance of the Indian climate.

But, at the moment, Patricia was completely oblivious of her own appearance. Her glance rested with affectionate amusement on Luttrell's hair, which was practically standing on end, thanks to his incurable trick of running his fingers through it whenever the contents of the newspaper interested him more than usual.

"You're not looking a bit like a proper, well-brought-up Commissioner at the present moment," she observed chidingly.

Luttrell regarded his reflection in the mirror with comic dismay.

"Look more like the Mad Mullah, don't I?" he admitted

ruefully. "And the show begins in half an hour, doesn't it?"

Patricia nodded. "If you mean the Residency garden-party—yes, it does," she answered demurely.

Father and daughter grinned happily at each other like a couple of truant schoolboys. Then Luttrell took her by the shoulders and ran her towards the door.

"Here, cut along, Pat, and get into your togs. We've got the majesty of the British Government to uphold."

They parted on the threshold of her bedroom, and within Patricia found her *ayah* waiting in a fever of suspense for her appearance. The woman was sitting huddled on the floor, anxiously watching the entrance to the room with attentive, bright, dark eyes like those of a squirrel. She sprang up with a cry of delight as Patricia entered.

"The Miss-*sahib* will be late," she declared with manifest concern. "Old *ayah* has been wondering why the Presence delayed to come that she might be dressed befittingly."

Patricia smiled at her. The woman had been her *ayah* for many years and worshipped her with an almost dog-like devotion.

"I've been talking with the Commissioner-*sahib* and forgot to look at the clock, Jamuna," she said. "But you'll get me dressed in time, I know."

The *ayah* smiled back, revealing a quick flash of white teeth.

"It is an order. The Miss-*sahib* need have no fear."

With deft brown fingers she began her mistress's toilette, and in less than the allotted space of time Patricia was dressed and ready to receive the Commissioner's guests.

Invitations from the Residency embraced a mixed multitude. The various regiments stationed at Coomara would, of course, be represented in full force, and in addition to sundry British officials and their wives, whose relative importance must be graciously and tactfully differentiated, certain native big-wigs were expected to be present and would have to be accorded an appropriate welcome.

Most girls of two-and-twenty would have looked forward to the afternoon's ordeal with some degree of apprehension, but Patricia viewed it with the unconcern of one well accustomed to the somewhat delicate ground covered by Anglo-Indian social and official obligations.

With the exception of the years she had spent at a boarding-school in England, her whole life had been passed in India, and since the death of her mother the entire burden of entertainment at the Residency had rested on her slight young shoulders. At first, it had appeared as though the death of his adored wife were going to break the Commissioner completely. He was like a ship without a rudder—almost submerged by grief, and Patricia herself, utterly stunned by the suddenness of the blow which had befallen them, had been powerless to comfort him. It had seemed to her impossible of belief that her beautiful mother, always so full of vitality and of a gay, light-hearted charm that had easily bridged the gulf of a generation which lay between them, should be *dead*. . . . One day playing hostess at a Residency function with all the wit and charm and gaiety which were so essentially a part of her; the next, stricken down with that dreadful suddenness wherewith India so often smites, lying silent and unresponsive in the strange and terrible remoteness of the dead.

But, when the first shock of horror and dismay had spent itself, Patricia recognized that even the depth of her own sorrow was no measure of her father's. Stewart Luttrell had been like a man crushed, his whole life, as it were, torn up by the roots. His first and strongest impulse had been to resign his position as Commissioner of Coomara, leave India, and bury himself and his grief together in some remote corner of England. And it was then that Patricia had realized the insistent claim of his suddenly bereft life upon her own. Deliberately putting aside her own individual sorrow, she had set herself to comfort his and to lead him out of the despairing depths into which he had sunk, combating with all

her might his expressed intention of resigning his commissionership. She knew instinctively that work—responsible, unremitting work that would absorb all his faculties—was the only thing which might help him to piece together once again his shattered life.

“You mustn’t give up Coomara, Sahib,” she had said with decision. “Look what you’ve done for the District since you’ve been here! They all trust you, the natives—and that’s worth anything to dear old England. Another man might just undo all you’ve accomplished. You’d hate that.”

She had touched the right chord—his pride in the District he governed, and his devotion to his country—that devotion which, curiously enough, seems to become so much more tinglingly real and passionate the further a man journeys from his motherland.

“Are you keen to stay out here, Pat?” he asked, as though weighing up the pros and cons.

“I think it would break my heart to leave India,” she answered with conviction.

“Then that settles it,” he had said, with a faint smile—the first smile which had lightened his face since Barbara Luttrell had been laid to rest in the British burial-ground.

That was five years ago, and now, though a world which held no Barbara would always be an alien world to Stewart Luttrell, he had taken hold of things once more and built up a new life on the ruins of the old happy existence that was gone. And in the process of rebuilding he and Patricia had drawn very close together. They were comrades in the fullest meaning of the word, and she played her part in the official side of their mutual life to the best of her ability.

He often told her that it was a very good “best.” She had unquestionably inherited a large share of her mother’s instinctive tact in dealing with the innumerable types and points of view with which she was brought into contact, and, beyond that, the glamour and gaiety of Anglo-Indian life

was in her blood. She loved it all—the freedom from those fixed conventions which govern an English household, the intensive social life, with its constant interchange of entertaining, the semi-state of the Residency, where the retinue of brown-skinned servants conferred a luxury of service of which she would have had no knowledge had she lived the average life of an English girl at home.

The India she knew was the India of ultra-civilization, alternating between the luxury of the Residency at Coomara and the expensive delights of Simla in the hot weather. Of the grilling existence of those who are compelled to remain in the plains throughout the merciless heat of the summer months she had no experience, nor of the hard and lonely life which falls to the lot of a woman at one or other of the small frontier stations, condemned to call an inadequate four-roomed bungalow "home." Even such hardships as India, that "grim Stepmother," inevitably metes out to the most pampered of her foster children were considerably mitigated, as far as Patricia was concerned, by the fact that Luttrell was the fortunate possessor of a fairly large private income in addition to his pay.

It was by no means the best kind of life for any girl, and it was to Patricia's credit that she had remained comparatively unspoiled. Unlike a large number of Anglo-Indian women, she was neither small-minded nor selfish nor neurotic, but she was thoroughly accustomed to having very much her own way in matters, and the whole trend of her existence was calculated to imbue her with a meretricious sense of values—of the significance of clothes and luxury and social pleasures as compared with simpler ways of finding happiness.

Her very position as the daughter of the Commissioner and hostess at the Residency tended to fix in her mind the importance of social amenities, and as she left her room, detail perfect from the hands of Jamuna, it was with a forgivable and extremely feminine little thrill of consciousness

that the frock she was wearing would probably cause half the women in Coomara to gnash their teeth with envy.

She found her father awaiting her on the veranda, and together they strolled out on the terrace where they usually received their guests. The Residency stood on a slight eminence, and this had enabled Luttrell, who had very decided ideas about a house and garden, to construct a wide terrace which, in English fashion, ran the whole length of the bungalow. From thence, a short flight of steps led down into the beautifully planned and cultivated *compound*, where orange and lime trees bordered the curving drive and where the twisting paths wound their way betwixt bushes of oleander and pomegranate.

In one respect, above all others, Patricia had earned the whole-hearted admiration of the entire station. She was a born hostess, a quality which is a sure passport to success—feminine success, at least—in India, and it was not until the latest comer was absorbed into the throng of guests strolling about the Residency grounds to the inspiring strains of a regimental band that she deserted her post on the terrace.

As she descended the steps a man who had been standing at their foot, absently watching the shifting crowd of guests, turned round as though intuitively aware of her approach. He was a tall man, unmistakably a soldier, his fair hair bleached almost white by long exposure to the Eastern sun, and his eyes, as they rested upon Patricia, held a light which no other woman had been able to kindle in them.

It was well known throughout Coomara that Major O'Halleran, the most confirmed bachelor in the station, had surrendered unconditionally to the Commissioner's daughter, and current gossip was much exercised as to why no engagement had ensued. What Coomara did not know was that Jim O'Halleran had long ago asked Patricia to marry him and had been met with a gentle but quite definite refusal—the kind of refusal which holds out no hope of a possible retraction.

He had taken it with the same steady pluck which had made him the good soldier that he was.

"You mean that—you'll never feel differently?" he had asked her. "You're quite sure, Pat?"

And Patricia, looking at him with those blue eyes of hers which were as straight and direct as any boy's, had answered quietly:

"I'm quite sure. I'm very sorry I'm sure"—her heart wrung by the pain which had drawn sudden harsh lines on his face—"but I *am* sure—quite."

"Then that's finished." O'Halleran braced himself against the blow. "I won't bother you again about—love. But I'd like to be your friend, still—if I may?"

He held out his hand and Patricia's went swiftly to meet it.

"I'll be very glad to call Jim O'Halleran my friend—always," she said simply.

And since then the friendship between them had grown and flourished—though O'Halleran had not yet learned to keep the something that was more than friendship out of his eyes at unguarded moments.

"At last!" he exclaimed, as Patricia came down the steps from the terrace. "I'd begun to think the stream of arrivals was never going to cease. All Coomara must be here this afternoon."

"It is rather a big crush," she admitted. "Still, it's just as well to kill as many birds as possible with one stone! We're working off our social obligations before we go into camp next month"—smiling.

"District work—or tiger?" he asked pertinently.

"Both, I expect. There's nothing like combining work and pleasure."

"And of course it's part of our Imperial job to rid the jungle of man-eating pests"—with a broad smile. "Now I'm going to carry you off to have a drink of some kind. Your throat must be as dry as a lime-kiln after saying 'how d'you do' for an hour on end."

Patricia nodded, and together they made their way towards the *shamianah*, a big tent whence issued the soft clatter of silver and china and the pleasant tinkle of ice in pails, signaling the various attractive forms of refreshment devised by the ingenuity of the Luttrell's *khansamah*.

"Tea? Or some kind of cup?" asked O'Halleran, when he had established his companion in a comfortable seat, and in response to her smiling "Tea, please," he dived back into the tent to procure it.

Within a few minutes Patricia was surrounded, and when O'Halleran returned from foraging in the *shamianah*, it was to discover her the centre of a group composed of Colonel Grant, commanding the Indian cavalry regiment stationed at Coomara, an elderly member of Parliament who was writing a book on India and touring the country in search of appropriate pabulum, and an eager handful of devoted subalterns.

With an inward anathema he relinquished all hope of the little intimate *tête-à-tête* talk he had anticipated, and resigned himself to sharing Patricia with the new-comers. The conversation, at first partaking of the usual light mixture of banter and local gossip prevalent on such occasions, became gradually weighted down by the member of Parliament's determined efforts to monopolize it. He was cut here to secure information as to the local administration of government in India, and, during an interval when he had found it quite impossible to buttonhole the Commissioner himself, it appeared to him no less than the act of benign Providence that he had succeeded in securing the attention of the Commissioner's daughter. There should be quite a lot of useful detail to be extracted from this source, and he set himself conscientiously to extract it, gradually shouldering the other men out of the conversation.

Patricia, covertly exchanging rueful signals of distress with Colonel Grant and O'Halleran, prepared herself to be thoroughly bored. The politician's thirst for knowledge

seemed insatiable, and at last, wearied out, she began to answer his fusillade of questions rather at random, with a brief inward spasm of amusement at the thought of the resultant inaccuracies which might conceivably adorn his prospective *magnum opus*. And then, just as she felt that she should scream if he launched another ponderous question at her, an unexpected diversion was created.

She became suddenly aware of a curious sense of stir at the further side of the *compound*. The well-dressed crowd, a kaleidoscope of gaily coloured frocks and sun-shades interspersed with divers uniforms and an occasional turbaned figure scintillating with jewels and rich embroideries, seemed to be breaking back into two wavering lines, like receding billows. She leaned forward, gazing in surprise at the unusual spectacle. It reminded her oddly of the concerted movement of a crowd depicted on a cinema screen.

"What can be happening?"

The words had scarcely passed her lips when it became evident that people were instinctively drawing aside to allow free passage to a tall loosely built man who came striding purposefully across the Residency gardens as though utterly oblivious that a social function of any kind was in progress. His dress and general appearance served to further emphasize the fact. He was garbed in khaki-coloured riding-kit, travel-stained and dusty and rather the worse for wear, and his topee shadowed a face that equally bore traces of the soil of travel. It was rather an ugly face, of the hatchet type, with an arrogant beak of a nose, burned by the sun to an unbecoming brown, and with a square chin and straight-lipped mouth that connoted more than a little obstinacy. Its redeeming feature was a pair of keen grey eyes, deep-set beneath brown, level brows—eyes that had the clear, far-seeing glance of one accustomed to the wide spaces of the earth.

Patricia's astonished gaze followed the man as he swung his way betwixt the little groups of guests and marched un-

ceremoniously up to the Commissioner, where he stood chatting with a couple of senior officers' wives. Petrified at the new-comer's temerity, she waited to see the quiet, chill look of displeasure manifest itself on Luttrell's face by which, without so much as a word of censure, he was always able to check the slightest presumption. Broad-minded and genial though he might be, he had a very clear idea of that invisible boundary line which marks the respect due to the British Commissioner, and Patricia felt quite certain in her own mind of the reception which would be accorded to this audacious individual who thrust himself, in such unseemly attire, into the midst of a Residency garden-party and then proceeded to amplify his offence by breaking in upon the Commissioner himself while he was leisurely engaged in dispensing hospitality and small-talk to a couple of the senior ladies of the station.

To her intense amazement, however, no expression of annoyance was visible on her father's face. Instead, he greeted the dusty stranger with unaffected warmth, although Patricia noticed a certain guarded look of anxiety spring into his eyes. Briefly making his excuses to the two ladies with whom he had been conversing, the Commissioner turned and walked rapidly away with the new-comer.

Patricia looked up at Major O'Halleran in blank astonishment.

"Who on earth," she said, "is that extraordinary individual with whom my father has just gone off?"

The member of Parliament was temporarily engaged in endeavouring to pump information out of one of the sub-alterns, and for the moment Patricia, together with O'Halleran and Colonel Grant, formed a little group apart. The eyes of the two men met. Then, with an odd twist of his mouth, O'Halleran answered:

"Why, don't you know? That's the Commissioner's 'mystery man.'"

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Before Patricia could ask for an explanation, the member of Parliament intervened with a fresh question, and she was reluctantly compelled to give him her attention and to leave the elucidation of O'Halleran's cryptic utterance until a more convenient season.

CHAPTER II

PINK SUGAR ICING

“WELL, what is it, Lorimer?”

The Commissioner spoke abruptly, with the harshness born of hidden tension. He and the travel-stained stranger who had intruded upon the Residency garden-party were standing together in a secluded part of the grounds, out of earshot of any of the guests.

“It’s murder—and will be riot if you don’t interfere pretty quickly.”

“Ah-h!” Luttrell sucked in his breath sharply and the gravity of his face deepened. “I was afraid it was something pretty serious. Otherwise you wouldn’t have——”

“Imperilled the prestige of the British Government by presenting myself at the Residency in this get-up?— To say nothing of shocking the ladies of Coomara!” Kerry Lorimer laughed sardonically. “No, Chief, I still retain a few primary instincts of civilization. Only the urgency of the matter induced me to break in upon you this afternoon.”

“I know, I know”—with a smile. “Well, what are the facts?”

Lorimer recounted them briefly. It appeared that the headman of Shantali, a village within Luttrell’s district, had been murdered and that, in consequence, a violent fracas had ensued between the inhabitants of Shantali and those of the neighbouring village of Lakapur—a fracas which seemed likely to contain the germ of dangerous developments.

“Gopal Singh’s at the bottom of it all, as usual,” pursued Lorimer. “He ran off with a Shantali man’s wife, and the

*zemindar*¹ took up the matter and declared he should report it to headquarters——”

“No report’s come in.”

Lorimer laughed grimly.

“No. Gopal Singh killed the old man off quick, before he could lay information, and now Gopal Singh, and the fellow whose wife he has appropriated, together with their respective relatives and a few of the *zemindar*’s thrown in as a make-weight, are all at each other’s throats. Both villages are in an uproar, and of course it may easily spread. We can’t afford to let things rip. The *budmashes* have been pretty active lately in that part of the District, as you know, and there’s a certain amount of disaffection there, ready to be fanned into flame on the slightest provocation.”

“The *zemindar* was loyal enough,” interposed Luttrell.

The other man nodded.

“Yes, old Baram was staunch to the core. That’s just it. They’re trying to fasten it on to us through his intention to report. Fear of British interference in a purely domestic matter, et cetera—you know the sort of excuses they trump up when they’re spoiling for a cheerful little row.”

The Commissioner reflected for a moment.

“I’ll ride out myself—to-night,” he said at last. “As you say, we can’t afford to let it spread. We don’t want a conflagration over nothing.”

“And do the thing in style, Chief,” counselled Lorimer. “Take a detachment of cavalry along. You’ll probably need ’em before you’re through”—with a grin.

Luttrell responded with a brief grimace.

“A pacific policy in dealing with the native is our political speciality,” he observed, a dry note of irony in his voice. “However——” His eyes met Lorimer’s understandingly.

“And now”—the Commissioner linked his arm affectionately in that of the younger man—“you must come along and

¹ Headman of the village.

have some grub. I'll get my daughter to look after you—I'd better see Grant about this job right away."

"I won't refuse that offer. I started before dawn and haven't eaten since."

"Man, you must be famished!"

Lorimer laughed.

"I've fasted longer than that on a good many occasions," he said carelessly.

"And you go back—when?" asked Luttrell, as they approached the house.

"Not with you"—decisively. A look of mutual intelligence passed between the two men. "You'd better leave the way—and the means—of my departure from Coomara to me."

"Right." Luttrell nodded as though entirely satisfied. "Well, come along in, and I'll send word to Patricia. I'd like you to meet her, Lorimer," he added, as if it were an afterthought.

A few minutes later Patricia, in answer to a message brought by one of her father's *chuprassees*,¹ slipped unobtrusively away from her guests to find the Commissioner and the man whose unceremonious arrival had so astonished her confabbing together on the veranda. She regarded the stranger with considerable disfavour. The least hint of anything approaching a lack of proper respect for her beloved "Sahib" was always calculated to rouse her resentment.

Nor did Lorimer improve matters much by his behaviour when her father presented him. He bestowed upon her a somewhat perfunctory bow, his eyes sweeping over her as briefly—as she told herself with rising indignation—as though she had been a chair or table to which Luttrell had drawn his attention. Then he turned back to her father and concluded the remark which her appearance on the scene had apparently interrupted. Patricia, feeling all at once extraordinarily young and of no importance, waited in silence

¹ Chuprassee: A Government servant.

for a moment. Then, as the stranger's quiet voice ceased, she cut in quickly:

"Did you want me for anything particular, father?"

"Yes. Lorimer here wants some grub," replied the Commissioner. "Will you see to it, Pat?"

She looked at him doubtfully. It struck her as extremely odd that her father should suggest her leaving their guests on behalf of this peculiar person whose outward man was certainly not calculated to create a favourable impression. Luttrell nodded reassuringly.

"That's all right. I'll attend to the lot out there," he said, smiling. And with a friendly nod toward Lorimer, who returned it with the utmost casualness, he left them together and disappeared in the direction of the garden. For a moment Patricia remained looking after his departing figure with dismay written large upon her face.

"I shan't detain you long, Miss Luttrell." At the sound of the stranger's voice she swung round to find his cool grey eyes regarding her quizzically. "A sandwich and a 'peg' will do me. Only—as you see—I'm not quite appropriately garbed for an appearance in the *shamianah*. I wouldn't trouble you at all," he added, "but for the fact that I've had nothing to eat since about five this morning."

Patricia's momentary dismay was instantly swept aside by her naturally hospitable instincts.

"Good heavens! You must be starving!" she exclaimed.

She led the way quickly in from the veranda, and, summoning one of the servants, ordered some cold meat and a whisky peg to be brought as soon as possible, and in a very few minutes Lorimer was disposing of the same with the rapidity of a man who thinks little about what he eats and cares less.

Patricia, meanwhile, sat in a chair near the open door of the veranda and endeavoured to make conversation. It was uphill work, seeing that her visitor gave her but small encouragement, contenting himself with the briefest of replies,

nor did he seem disposed to volunteer any information about himself. At the same time, she was conscious that he was watching her. Twice, when she looked up, it was to encounter the glance of his extraordinarily keen eyes, regarding her with an expression she was unable to interpret.

"It seems odd we have never met before," she said at last. "I suppose you must be a *very* old friend of my father's?"

He looked up quickly.

"Why should you suppose that? Do I appear so extremely hoary-headed?"—with some amusement.

Patricia flushed hotly.

"No, oh, no!" she exclaimed hastily. "Of course I didn't mean that. It was only that it's unusual—my father doesn't generally—I mean——" She stammered off into an embarrassed silence. Lorimer composedly finished her sentence for her.

"Only the Commissioner doesn't usually receive visitors who appear in such dishevelled attire. Is that what's worrying you?"

She detected a hint of satire behind the unperturbed speech. This man, this outrageous stranger, who light-heartedly countered all the usual conventions of society, was secretly laughing at her.

"No, he doesn't," she replied stiffly.

"In fact, if I'd presented myself at the front door in the usual way I probably shouldn't have been admitted?" he continued, still with that irritating inflection of amusement in his voice.

"No, I don't suppose you would."

He nodded.

"Which is precisely the reason why I came in as I did—over the *compound* wall," he announced complacently.

Patricia made no rejoinder, and after a moment he tossed her another question.

"That doesn't please you any better, does it?" Then, as

she still vouchsafed no answer, he went on: "Aren't you rather a stickler for etiquette?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said at last, driven into making a response of some sort.

"I mean that you think a tremendous lot of the outside of the cup and platter, don't you? You're not even quite sure"—smiling ironically—"whether I'm a fit person for you to be conversing with."

"I'm quite sure of that," she retorted. "Or my father wouldn't have introduced you."

"One to you!" he admitted, unabashed. "I bow to the indisputability of your statement. Yet my clothes are unmistakably disreputable. And I'm sure you're inclined to judge a man by his clothes."

"You have no grounds for being sure of anything about me," she returned swiftly, with a slightly contemptuous inflection on the "you."

Again he smiled.

"Second score to you! Naturally, no one dwelling in outer darkness like myself has the right to be sure of anything regarding the creatures of light—of which you are undoubtedly one. And yet"—slowly—"I am—quite sure—about some things." Then, with a sudden upsetting directness: "How long have you been in India, by the way?"

Patricia's pride rose in arms. Here, at least, he was hopelessly wrong if he imagined he could patronize her because she had only just come out from Home.

"Always—except when I was at school," she answered promptly, with a slight note of triumph in her voice.

But he remained entirely unimpressed. He regarded her contemplatively a moment.

"Ah! But then of course you've only seen one kind of India—the pink sugar icing part on the top. I expect"—reflectively—"that's all you'll ever see of the world in general."

"Why should you expect that?" she demanded, outwardly cool, although inwardly wrathfully indignant. She would have liked to treat this impossible person with silent contempt, but somehow she could not refrain from answering his impertinent speeches. His unspoken assumption of superiority was maddening.

"Why? Oh, I just think it," he replied with unimpaired nonchalance. "I don't fancy"—with a brief smile—"that you'd care much for the taste of the remainder. You'd find it hopelessly stodgy."

"I suppose by that you mean that you think I'm very superficial?"

"Do I?"—with tantalizing indifference.

"Well, if not, what did you mean?"—impatiently.

He rose, having concluded his meal, and picked up his topee from the chair on which it lay.

"I think," he said with an odd gleam in his eyes—"I think that you resemble a great many of your sex."

Patricia felt she would have liked to shake him. He was so aggravatingly non-committal. As though he read the question which hovered on the tip of her tongue, he added with a slight smile:

"Quite content with the pink sugar icing, you know."

It was spoken very mildly, with a touch of quiet humour, but in some way or other the little speech roused her indignation more than any other he had uttered. Perhaps it was because, deep within her, she was subconsciously aware that it held a substratum of truth. She rose to her feet.

"In that case, the kindest thing you can do is to wish me plenty of it," she retorted defiantly.

"I do—oh, I do," he said warmly. "Any amount of it—with lots of crystallized violets and cherries thrown in." He might have been speaking to a child, she reflected hotly.

"And, in the meantime, thanks for the much more solid—and suitable—fare with which you've just regaled me," he

went on, indicating with a glance the remnants of his recent repast. He held out his hand, and mechanically she laid hers within it. "Good-bye," he said. Adding lightly: "And don't worry too much over the quite valueless comments of a man from the wilds upon the ways of civilization. I'm half a savage—as Luttrell will tell you if you ask him."

He stepped out on to the veranda, and, in response to the half-doubtful expression on Patricia's face, vouchsafed carelessly:

"I'll take myself off in the least conspicuous manner possible."

He walked rapidly along to the further end of the terrace and, vaulting lightly over the low balustrade on to the ground beneath, disappeared amongst the trees.

CHAPTER III

AN EXPLANATION

AS soon as her somewhat unusual visitor had vanished from sight, Patricia hurried out into the grounds once more, feeling slightly concerned lest her disappearance from the scene should have attracted attention. But people were still strolling about, and conversation still buzzing unabatedly, while the band continued to discourse the latest fox-trot, and, glancing down at the watch on her wrist, she was astonished to discover that she had really been absent for only a very brief space of time—hardly long enough for any of the guests to have missed her and begun asking themselves where she was.

It seemed almost incredible. She felt as though everything that had happened earlier in the day, prior to her conversation with Kerry Lorimer, must have taken place ages ago, and even while she mingled once more with her guests, exchanging the usual banal generalities of garden-party small-talk, she was conscious that the recollection of her interview with him stood out with a curious vividness, throwing all else into negligible shadow.

She was quite unused to the kind of treatment he had accorded her. Almost inevitably, people were predisposed to bestow on her a little extra civility and attention, in consideration of her position as daughter of the District Commissioner, and Lorimer's carelessly detached and cavalier attitude towards her had been in striking contrast. He had treated her with a cool indifference that had in it a flavour of disapproval, she reflected resentfully, and she still tingled at the remembrance of some of his caustically uttered speeches. By what right did he take it upon himself to

censure her? The more she thought about it the more she marvelled at her own unwonted meekness under his calm criticism. She felt thoroughly annoyed with herself—and with him, too. Somehow the man seemed to have robbed her of her usual poise and self-possession.

Presently she was joined by Major O'Halleran; and she began at once to speak of the subject uppermost in her thoughts.

"Jim, who is that queer person? You know who I mean—the one you called the Commissioner's 'mystery man'? He'd no right to come here—like that—this afternoon. It was almost an insult."

"Might have been with anyone else," agreed O'Halleran laconically. "But Kerry Lorimer has special privileges, you know."

"Why should he have?"—quickly.

"I really can't tell you"—smiling down at her humorously. "I don't know very much about him. But people who do speak of him as enthusiastically as if he were the prop and mainstay of the British Empire in India."

"How absurd! Why, he looked more like a tramp than anything else."

At that moment Colonel Grant approached with the intention of making his farewells, and Patricia turned to him impulsively.

"Do *you* know anything about him, Colonel Grant?"

He lifted his eyebrows whimsically.

"About whom? I'm not a thought-reader, you know, Miss Luttrell."

She flushed, laughing a little at her own impetuosity, and proceeded to explain.

"About the man who burst in on us in such an extraordinary manner this afternoon—the Commissioner's 'mystery man,' as Major O'Halleran calls him."

The Colonel laughed.

"Did his appearance shock you very much?" he asked

with some amusement. "It was just like Lorimer to rush in without giving two thoughts as to whether his costume were appropriate to the occasion or not."

"It was very impertinent of him," said Patricia.

"I think you'll have to forgive him, Miss Luttrell," answered Colonel Grant persuasively. "He brought us rather urgent news."

"News?"

"Yes. It's in a great measure thanks to Lorimer that things go so smoothly in your father's District. He's here, there, and everywhere—quite unknown to the natives, and we are often able to scotch a little trouble in its earliest stages, thanks to his flair for acquiring useful information. Now I must be off, as there's a small matter to be investigated to-night. Good-bye."

Patricia shook hands and turned back to O'Halleran, still unconvinced.

"Surely Colonel Grant is exaggerating?" she said. "If Mr. Lorimer is such an important person"—disdainfully—"how is it one doesn't meet him anywhere? I've never set eyes on him before—nor even heard my father speak of him."

"He never shows up anywhere," replied O'Halleran. "I don't suppose wild horses would have dragged him here in the middle of an afternoon show if he hadn't had something pretty important to report."

"But has he any official position?" persisted Patricia.

"None whatever. But he works like blazes for the Commissioner—does some thundering good work, too—and he's probably of more use to your father than half a dozen official people."

"It sounds very odd," commented Patricia. "Is that all you know about him?"

"Practically all that anyone knows. He's more or less of a mystery. Seems to come and go pretty much as he chooses. Now and again he disappears for six months at

a time. But Grant and the one or two men 'in the know' appear to think a lot of him."

"How do *you* come to be 'in the know'?" asked Patricia. O'Halleran laughed.

"Quite by accident. I happened to be chatting alone with your father one day when Lorimer suddenly appeared from nowhere—dropped out of the skies, apparently, just as he usually does—and so the Commissioner was more or less obliged to let me into the secret. But he wasn't particularly communicative, even then."

By this time the majority of people were making a move to go, and for the next half-hour Patricia's attention was fully occupied. But all the while that she was politely shaking hands with first one and then another, her thoughts were busy with the extraordinary stranger, under the lash of whose ironical tongue she still smarted and of whom Colonel Grant and O'Halleran, and apparently Luttrell himself, seemed to think such great things. She determined to ask the latter about him that very evening.

But when the last of the guests had gone, she found Luttrell preoccupied with arrangements for his own departure. He informed her briefly that he proposed starting for Shantali almost at once, and it was not until several days later that she was able to broach the subject of the "mystery man."

The opportunity presented itself on the evening of the Commissioner's return. He looked a trifle tired, but wore the contented air of a man who has successfully unravelled the knots of a difficulty, and when dinner was over he and Patricia adjourned, as usual, on to the veranda. Luttrell filled and lit a beloved old pipe, and, leaning back in his chair, blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"It's good to be back," he said in tones of satisfaction. "And it's doubly good to reflect that that confounded Gopal Singh is laid by the heels at last and will cause us no more trouble."

"Is everything quiet, then, at Shantali?" inquired Patricia.

"Perfectly quiet—now"—grimly. "And I fancy they'll remain quiet there for a bit."

"Thanks, I suppose, to Mr. Lorimer," she rejoined tentatively.

He regarded her with speculative eyes.

"Yes. Thanks to Kerry Lorimer."

There was a short silence. Then Patricia asked a little hurriedly:

"Sahib, who is this Mr. Lorimer? Why haven't I ever met him before?"

The Commissioner laughed.

"You haven't met him before, chiefly because his visits to me are usually very brief and attended by as little ostentation as possible. All the same"—with a twinkle—"you have seen him before—several times."

Patricia shook her head.

"I think you must be wrong, Sahib. I haven't the slightest recollection of meeting him."

The Commissioner's smile broadened.

"Do you remember an extremely ragged old beggar who sits sometimes at the Residency gates? You've given him a few *annas* on more than one occasion. That was Kerry Lorimer."

"That old beggar—Mr. Lorimer!"—in tones of amazement.

"Yes. He's an absolute artist in disguises. I'd defy any one, native or otherwise, to recognize him when he's made up, and as he can talk a dozen different dialects he can mingle with the natives—and gossip with them—without fear of discovery."

But Patricia was hardly listening. A hot flush had mounted to her face at the recollection of the occasional charity she had dispensed to the beggar at the Residency

gates. If it was true what her father said—that this tattered old native was actually Lorimer in disguise—he must have been laughing at her in his sleeve all the time, whilst pretending to accept her alms with servile humility and gratitude. The irritation she already felt against him deepened.

“But why does he do this?” she asked. “What is he?”

“Officially—nothing. Unofficially, he’s an extra pair of eyes and ears to me—eyes and ears that can see and listen where the British Commissioner or any official working for him could never hope to penetrate.”

Patricia made no comment, and her father continued quietly:

“I’m telling you all this—well, for certain reasons of my own. Besides”—with a flash of humour—“now that Lorimer’s appearance the other afternoon has piqued your curiosity, I don’t suppose you’d leave me any peace of mind till I did tell you about him.”

“No, I don’t suppose I should,” she assented, smiling. “Go on, Sahib. I may as well hear the rest, now you’ve begun. All the same, I don’t think I like your Mr. Lorimer.”

“Don’t you? I’m sorry for that. I think very highly of him. He’ll dare anything, while his facility for disguise enables him to go down into the bazaars and gather up all the current gossip. And the bazaars, as you know, are the pulse of India. . . . The British Empire owes a lot to Lorimer, though it will always remain unaware of the fact—more’s the pity!”

Luttrell smoked on in silence for a while. Then he added regretfully:

“The trouble is he’s getting restive. I’m afraid he won’t remain in India much longer.”

“Do pay and promotion count for nothing, then?”

“Nothing at all. They don’t affect him. He takes no

pay, and he is fairly well off by inheritance. The work he does—invaluable work it is, too!—is done for sheer love of adventure.”

“Do you mean to say,” demanded Patricia in surprise, “that he wouldn’t take any official position—if he could get it?”

Luttrell roared.

“Not on your life he wouldn’t! The hank of red tape that would tie up Lorimer isn’t made. He’s a free-lance—now and always.”

“I think it’s very peculiar of him. I wonder he cares to work so hard if he has independent means.”

The Commissioner’s face clouded.

“Men work—sometimes—because, without work, their lives would be empty,” he said quietly.

It was a few minutes before either of them spoke again. Luttrell seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, but at last he roused himself to ask with assumed lightness:

“Any more questions?”

“Only one”—with a smile. “Why doesn’t Mr. Lorimer ever appear in society—in the intervals when he isn’t play-acting as a native?” There was a faint inflection of scorn in her voice.

An odd expression crossed the Commissioner’s face.

“Lorimer has no use for society,” he said curtly, and then, deliberately, it seemed, he switched the conversation on to a fresh topic. “By the way, Pat, I quite forgot to tell you that I’ve invited a young man to come into camp with us when we go.”

“Have you, Sahib? Is he a nice young man?”

“He ought to be if he’s anything like his father. It’s Noel Harvey, son of a very old pal of mine. The boy’s fresh out from England and is simply breaking his heart for a taste of big game shooting. I met him a fortnight ago and liked the look of him, so I suggested he should come

with us and have a shot at bagging his first tiger. Does the arrangement meet with your approval?"

He awaited her verdict with half-serious, half-comic anxiety. The weeks when she and her father went into camp together were always the most enjoyable of the whole year to both of them. They were too good friends ever to wish to be separated, and Patricia invariably accompanied him, whatever sport was afoot, even if she did not always take an active part in the proceedings.

Camp life on the luxurious scale organized by the Commissioner was a delightful institution, and people were wont to angle quite shamelessly for an invitation to join the Luttrells when it was rumoured that they proposed going into camp. But it was an understood thing between father and daughter, as between comrades, that any friends invited should be mutually acceptable. Hence the Commissioner's confession concerning the invitation he had given to his old friend's son.

"I hope you approve, Pat?" he repeated, as for a moment she returned no answer.

She smiled across at him good-humouredly.

"Quite, Sahib," she replied. "I've great confidence in your powers of discrimination."

CHAPTER IV

ESSENTIAL VALUES

VERY quietly, with infinite caution, Patricia shifted her position, heaving a small sigh of relief as the cramped muscles of her limbs relaxed and the blood began circulating freely through her veins once more. For nearly an hour she had been sitting perched up in a *machan*—a species of small platform fixed up between the forked boughs of a tree—waiting in tense, expectant silence for the approach of a tiger, and feminine flesh and blood were beginning to cry out at the prolonged strain.

She and her father, accompanied by Noel Harvey—whose “niceness” had completely justified the Commissioner’s powers of discrimination—had been in camp several days, but it was only early this morning that the local *shikari* had triumphantly appeared with certain news regarding the vicinity of a tiger.

Noel had been almost too excited to eat his breakfast, and as they all rode out together towards the jungle, the Commissioner, a little afraid of the boy’s impulsive enthusiasm, expended a considerable amount of breath and energy in cautioning him upon the various points to be remembered—both for his own safety and the safety of his companions—when tiger-shooting.

The *shikari*, a man whom Luttrell had employed on many previous occasions, had arranged all the details of the shoot. *Machans* had been fixed up in trees some little distance apart for the Commissioner and his daughter and guest, screened round with branches to render them inconspicuous, whilst further afield, hidden in the boughs of flanking trees, perched the native “stops,” whose share in the proceedings was to

drive the tiger back towards the semicircle of guns if he showed signs of breaking away to right or left. A mile or more away, a string of coolies, collected together by the *shikari*, were beating the cover of high, shrubby undergrowth.

Patricia, inured to the long, inactive waits necessitated by the sport, wondered idly how Noel was getting on in his tree-perch. Several times the intense stillness of the jungle had been broken. Once she had heard the grunting scutter of a pig through the low bushes. Another time the sudden whirr of wings, as a bird rose close at hand, sent her muscles taut with anticipation. And if each trifling forest noise could so stir her own pulses, accustomed as she was to the nervous tension of those prolonged periods of suspense, she could make a pretty good guess at Noel's probable condition of suppressed excitement!

He was such a boy, so recently enfranchised from the paternal vicarage at home in England, that in a way it had seemed something of a risk to bring him out tiger-shooting. Luttrell had ruefully acknowledged as much to her one evening as they sat alone together in the big, luxurious tent which served them as a dining-room. But he was such a charming boy, so full of pluck and laughter and gay good spirits, and so dead keen on the promised shoot, that the Commissioner hadn't had the heart to rescind his promise.

"I shall have to keep a sharp eye on him, that's all," he told Patricia. "He simply doesn't know what the word fear means, and as he hasn't the experience of a baby, it's quite on the cards he'll take some foolhardy risk that'll land him and the whole lot of us in an infernal tight corner."

The recollection of her father's comments intruded unpleasantly on Patricia's mind as she sat alone in her *machan*, and she felt her heart give a sudden little jerk of apprehension. If—supposing anything happened . . . supposing things went wrong? A tiger-shoot is so much a matter of good team-work that a catastrophe may very easily be engendered by the rashness of even a single member of the party.

Patricia was not usually subject to nervous fancies. Perhaps the long wait in the heat and the queer, listening silence of the jungle had frayed her nerve a trifle, for suddenly the realization of Noel's inexperience rushed over her with overwhelming force, and for an instant she felt herself in the grip of naked fear. She wished intensely that she had dissuaded her father from bringing him with them, or that the *shikari* might prove, after all, to have been mistaken in his conviction that they would see good sport to-day—wished, indeed, that anything else was the case but that she and her father and Noel Harvey were sitting aloft in three trees patiently watching for the appearance of a tiger. With a determined effort she pulled herself together, forcibly controlling the riot of her thoughts, although the restless drumming movement of her fingers on her knee betrayed the tension of her mind.

All at once the tense hush was broken by a sound—an oddly hollow sound which broke upon the quiet like the unheralded plop of a stone dropped suddenly into the depths of a still pool. Patricia's muscles stiffened. She knew what it was—the single gentle clap of the hands given by one of the native "stops" who had sighted the tiger breaking away to one side and thus turned him back. In an instant all fear left her, and, thrilling to the excitement of the moment, she bent noiselessly forward and peered between the screening branches. For a fraction of time the silence held. Then came the whispering brush of the undergrowth against a moving body, the sharp crackle of twigs breaking and snapping beneath a padding footstep, and a moment later a huge tiger leaped lightly out into the clearing below. He stood poised, listening, a great striped beast with flexed muscles rippling beneath his gleaming coat, while a shaft of sunlight, penetrating betwixt the trees, revealed his big cat's eyes, angry and suspicious. Patricia caught her breath at the sheer wild beauty of him.

Almost simultaneously came the report of a rifle, shat-

tering the silence. Followed an answering roar, brief and furious, as with a bound the tiger flung itself sideways into the scrub and disappeared from view, while a drift of smoke floated out from the tree where Noel sat perched and hung raggedly in the air.

The tiger was hit, unquestionably, and Patricia was conscious of a sympathetic glow of exultation on Noel's behalf. He would be jubilant, she knew, although it yet remained to be discovered whether the animal had been killed outright or whether he were only wounded and had got away, in which case it would be necessary to hunt him down on the *howdah* elephant, waiting in charge of a *mahout* some distance in the rear, and finish him off.

"Good shot, Noel!"

Unconsciously she uttered the words aloud, tingling with a vicarious sense of triumph. But even as she spoke, her expression suddenly altered and she bit the words off short, stricken with horrified dismay by what she saw. A figure was coming running across the clearing. She caught a glimpse of Noel's eager face and of his fair head shining in the filtering sunlight—his topee had fallen off and lay on the ground a dozen yards behind him—and recognized what had happened. Carried away on a wave of uncontrollable excitement, he had forgotten all the instructions laboriously drilled into him by Luttrell and was dashing off in reckless pursuit of what might prove to be that most dangerous of animals, a tiger that has been wounded.

"Go back! Go back!" She shrieked out the words, but apparently he did not hear her, for he raced on, heedless of any risk, and the next moment she descried another figure, bigger, longer limbed, following Noel's slight boyish one. Luttrell, good sportsman that he was, had realized the probable danger into which the younger man was rushing, and was hurrying after him to avert it if he could, if not, to share it.

Patricia caught her breath in a sudden bleak agony of

terror. It had all happened with such terrible swiftness. An instant before, safety for all of them and the bubbling elation born of Noel's successful shot. Now, fear and consternation—a sickening dread of imminent danger which seemed to turn her heart to ice. She tried to move, but her limbs felt powerless—to scream a warning, but her lips were stiff with fright and only a wordless moaning broke from her.

Noel veered towards the cover into which the tiger had disappeared, and Luttrell swerved in his tracks to follow him. At the same moment, on their left flank, she discerned a stealthy movement in the bushes. She knew what that meant—a wounded tiger, and as she saw her "Sahib's" beloved figure headed straight for the hidden menace lurking in the scrub, the something which had held her motionless and rigid seemed to snap.

A strangled cry tore its way through her throat, and desperately, with fumbling haste, she began to climb down from the *machan*. Below, the trunk of the tree ran upward, branchless for a dozen feet or more. But Patricia was in riding-kit, unimpeded by any skirts, and, supple as a boy, she swung clear of the boughs and slid down the long straight trunk to the ground. As her feet touched the solid earth she set off running in the direction which her father had taken—running blindly, with choking, sobbing breath, stumbling over the rough ground, conscious of one thing only—of her urgent, overpowering need to be with him in whatever danger threatened.

All at once, he glanced round over his shoulder and saw her. He flung up his arms and shouted, but she ran wildly on. Then suddenly there came the spluttering crash of breaking branches as a huge form reared itself from the low scrub and, with a maddened roar of pain and fury, leaped at her. . . . Patricia was conscious of a flash of sickening realization, of a breathless fraction of time packed with illimitable horror. Then a rifle shot rang out, close at hand, deafening her—the whole world seemed to rock

with the terrific noise of it—and the huge shape hurtling towards her dropped suddenly to earth, like a stone, and lay still.

She stood staring at it, stupidly—at that great brindled body a bare couple of yards away. She felt numbed—stupefied by the swift clash of danger and deliverance. Then some one took her roughly by the shoulder and a harsh voice exclaimed:

“Great God in heaven! Are you mad?”

She turned round to find herself looking straight into the furious grey eyes of Kerry Lorimer. He gave her a little shake.

“Are you out of your senses, girl? If you don’t know more about tiger-shooting than to leave your *machan* like that and rush into the cover, you’d better stay at home in future. What in the name of goodness possessed you?”

She stared at him dumbly for a moment. When at last she spoke it was slowly and with difficulty, as though it were an effort to form the words.

“What are you doing here?”

He gave a short laugh.

“Shooting tigers before they eat you up, apparently. Come,” he added bluntly, “pull yourself together.”

But instead of obeying him, she buried her face in her hands, while long, dry, suffocating sobs shook her slight form from head to foot.

“Here, I say—pull up——” Lorimer spoke with a kind of rough gentleness, patting her shoulder rather awkwardly.

“Can’t you pull up?”

Patricia lifted a working face.

“No, I—I can’t!” she gasped. “I—I thought Sahib was going to be killed.”

“Not I!” Luttrell’s voice, rather breathless but infinitely cheerful and reassuring, broke on her ears. He and Noel had run up as quickly as possible, but they had been still some distance away when the wounded tiger had emerged

from the bushes. "You were much nearer being killed than I, by a long way," he added. He put his arm round the shivering girl, and with a choking sigh of utter relief she leaned against him and cried helplessly.

Luttrell was too wise to check her tears. He merely held her quietly in his arms, soothing her with his touch, whilst over her bent head he exchanged a few brief words with Lorimer.

"Thank God you were in time, Kerry!" he said quietly. No more, but those few words and the tone in which they were uttered conveyed all the thanks a man could need. "How did you come to be here?" he added.

"I wanted to see you rather particularly and rode over to your camp—I'm camping not far away, myself. You weren't there, of course, but they told me your whereabouts, so I came on. I left my horse in charge of one of your men whom I found doing nothing to earn his living, and footed it along to this clearing."

The Commissioner smiled and shook his head. "Just like your confounded risky ways," he said. "One of these days you'll come to grief, Lorimer. Why will you persist in taking unnecessary risks, man?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Naught never comes to harm," he responded indifferently.

"Was it anything very urgent?"

Lorimer's eyes travelled swiftly from the girlish figure in Luttrell's arms to the dead tiger sprawled a few feet away.

"It can wait till you've finished up here."

"We shall go straight back to camp," said Luttrell. "We've had enough tiger-shooting for one day, I think"—grimly. "You'd better ride back with us."

He glanced down at his daughter. By this time her sobs had ceased and she was standing very quietly within the curve of his arm, only an occasional shiver which ran through

her body bearing witness to the strain through which she had passed.

"Better now, Pat, old thing?" he asked gently.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and divided a rather April smile betwixt him and Lorimer.

"Quite all right, Sahib," she said, disengaging herself from his arm. "I'm—I'm awfully sorry to have been such a fool. I don't think I'm any more fit to go out tiger-shooting than Noel!"

Young Harvey caught the tail-end of her smile and came impulsively to her side. He was looking somewhat shame-faced and oppressed at the consequences which had followed so swiftly upon his foolhardy action.

"I simply don't know what to say for myself," he acknowledged with eager and rather charming penitence. "I lost my head and behaved like an absolute ass. I can only ask your forgiveness, Miss Luttrell. And yours, too, sir," he added, turning to the Commissioner.

There was something very disarming about his frank apology and Luttrell laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"All right, my lad," he said good-naturedly. "We've all had our first tiger-shoot, and probably it's as much by good luck as anything else that we came through with whole skins. Anyway, you know a thundering lot more about the job now than you did two hours ago, and I guess you'll need no further teaching as to the necessity for caution." He paused, then added with a smile: "The skin's yours, of course. You'll agree, Lorimer?"

Kerry, too, smiled.

"Why, yes, of course it is. The first shot always claims it, you know."

The obvious delight on Noel's face spoke a whole volume of thanks in itself without his half-shy: "I say, sir, it's jolly good of you—after the way I've messed up the entire shoot, too! But I think Miss Luttrell has a much better right to the skin than I."

Patricia shook her head.

"No, thank you," she said with decision. "I've seen quite as much of that particular tiger as I ever want to see. I've no desire to possess a perpetual reminder of him in the shape of a hearthrug!"

They all laughed, and as so often happens in the course of reaction from acute emotion, the conversation ended on a light note of chaff and banter.

"Well, we'd better be getting back to camp," said Luttrell. "You follow on and dine with us, Lorimer," he added hospitably, as he turned away to give instructions for the *howdah* elephant to be sent for to convey them home. Meanwhile, Noel, unable any longer to resist the inclination, had moved across to where lay the dead body of the tiger and now stood gloating rapturously over its magnificent proportions. For the moment Lorimer and Patricia were to all intents and purposes alone.

She avoided looking at him. She had heard her father ask him to dine with them in camp, and something within her rebelled wildly against the idea. She did not want this man to dine with them in the friendly intimacy which such an invitation conveyed—rather would she have chosen to keep him at the safe distance of the barest acquaintanceship. She had disliked him at their very first meeting, she told herself, and she liked him no better now for having just saved her life. She would infinitely have preferred to owe her continued existence on this planet to someone else rather than to this unpolished individual who had thought fit to amuse himself at her expense on the day of the Residency garden-party.

"Shall I come?" he asked abruptly.

The curt question, chiming in so aptly with her thoughts, brought the colour to her cheeks. With an effort she lifted her eyes to meet the keen grey ones bent upon her.

"I hope you will," she replied, conscious of a certain restraint in her voice which she was powerless to prevent.

Perhaps he detected the secret unwillingness in her response, for he swung round upon her with a fresh question, even more difficult to answer truthfully.

"Would you rather I didn't come?" he demanded bluntly. She fenced.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Why? Because—Oh"—with a short laugh—"because I've no pretty clothes to put on. If I come, I shall have to come just as I am. And I imagine you'd regard a boiled shirt at dinner as a *sine qua non*. . . . You've got a lot to learn about essential values," he added.

"And are you proposing to teach me?" she flashed back. He stared down at her consideringly.

"Yes," he said at last, slowly. "I think I should like to teach you—that, and a few other things as well."

For a moment she made no answer. The sudden significance in his tones left her shaken and confused—vibrantly conscious of the man's forceful personality. Finally, recovering her composure with an effort, she spoke with assumed lightness.

"Then you'd better come this evening—and give me a first lesson!"

His gaze met hers with a sudden challenging directness. It was as though he dared her to measure swords with him.

"Very well," he said briefly. "I'll come."

By this time the elephant had been brought up by its *mahout*, and in a few minutes Patricia, with her father and Noel, had mounted to the *howdah* and were being borne leisurely back to camp.

The last thing upon which her eyes rested as the elephant lumbered off through the jungle was Kerry Lorimer's tall, loose-limbed figure standing in the clearing, with the tiger which he had killed stretched out on the ground beside him.

His hand was resting on his hip, and there was a certain careless arrogance in his whole attitude. Somehow the pose he had unconsciously assumed, together with the great dead

beast lying at his feet, seemed to her typical of the man—of his strength and swift, decisive action, and of a certain ruthlessness of character which she sensed in him—the force of which she was subconsciously beginning to fear. It seemed almost to menace her, to threaten the tranquil freedom of spirit which she had always known. She could imagine this man trying to bend a woman to his will and flatly refusing to recognize failure. With a little shiver she turned her face away from that arrogant figure, etched so clearly in the quivering afternoon glow, and kept her gaze fixed determinedly ahead.

CHAPTER V

IN CAMP

DINNER was over at the camp and the Commissioner and Noel had gone off together to have a look at the tiger's skin, concerning which a servant had brought word that it was now ready for the *sahibs'* inspection. Patricia had declined an invitation to accompany them. She was still somewhat shaken and unnerved by the afternoon's adventure, and the bare thought of seeing again that ominous striped coat filled her with the strongest repulsion. Lorimer, also, had remained behind, and the two of them were standing silently together at the door of the main tent, looking out towards the distant hills.

The swift Eastern night had long since fallen, but a clear moon hung in the dusky blue overhead. The moonlight lay low along the sky's horizon, like spilled mother-o'-pearl, and touched with silver fingers the scattered tents of the encampment. Here and there, amid the servants' quarters, the ruddy glow of a fire quivered like some crimson-hearted jewel.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Lorimer abruptly. And somehow the laconic phrase, with its quite inadequate adjective, succeeded in conveying to Patricia just what he was feeling—the picturesque beauty of it all and the glamour which was India. "Though, I suppose," he went on quickly, as though he regretted giving her even this slight glimpse of his inner emotions, "you'd much prefer the electric lights of Coomara—and all that goes with them."

Patricia sensed the veiled contempt in his tones and, as before, it roused her to opposition.

"On the contrary," she returned with spirit. "I enjoy camp life very much for a change."

"Do you call this—'camp life'?" He laughed and gestured rather scornfully towards the luxurious interior of the big marquee at the door of which they were standing. In appearance there was actually very little to distinguish it from an ordinary well-furnished room. Beyond it lay the sleeping-tents and kitchen. "Why, what do you lack here that you have at Coomara—carpets, cushions, silver and glass, servants, everything the heart of civilized woman could demand! You wouldn't like camp life as I understand it. A tin plate and mug to eat and drink from, and a bone-handled knife—or your penknife—to carve with."

"No," she replied composedly. "I should not. As you remarked just now, I'm civilized woman."

"Over-civilized. I'd like to put you camping as I understand the word, washing up your own plate—the tin one, you know—when you've finished your grub, and sleeping on a camp-bed—if you're lucky! It would"—smiling briefly—"make a woman of you."

"Or a savage," retorted Patricia.

"I suppose that's what you set me down for. Isn't it?"

"I certainly think you're—primitive," she returned.

"So is God; so is nature. I don't want to be anything else. After all, it's the big, primitive things that count."

She glanced up interrogatively. He was staring out across the moon-swept plain, in his eyes a curious dreaming expression so totally opposed to their usual hard, impenetrable gaze that it took her by surprise.

"What kind of things?" she said hesitatingly, the question seeming drawn from her almost against her will.

His glance came back to her face and rested there.

"Birth and death," he answered quietly. "Courage to face life, and love to sweeten it. The first two are inevitable, the beginning and end, and in between, if a man can find the others he's got all that matters."

"I think you ought to have lived in the Stone Age," she protested, shying away from the depths upon which he had touched. "Your wants seem so few."

"I've no use for the 'frills' of modern existence, if that's what you mean," he returned bluntly. "But if you think it over, you'll find that the two things I've named cover a fair slice of ground."

"While *I* think I rather like the 'frills,' as you call them," replied Patricia.

"I know you do"—with a grin. "The pink sugar icing—as I told you once before. Do you know what I'd like to do to you?"

"I don't expect it would be anything very nice"—shaking her head.

He laughed.

"No, I don't suppose you'd enjoy it. At least, not at first. I'd like to take you right out of this forcing-house existence you lead, dump you down in a cottage about twenty miles from anywhere, and make you dig out of life the things that don't depend on your surroundings."

"I shouldn't enjoy that—first or last," she replied dryly. "I'm sure I shouldn't take to the 'simple life' at all kindly."

He leaned against the tent-pole and regarded her speculatively.

"Supposing the man you were going to marry lived that kind of life?" he suggested suddenly. "What would you do?"

A wave of indignant colour flooded her face. He was going too far, just as he had done on the occasion of their first meeting.

"I can't imagine anything so unlikely," she said aloofly. "I should have nothing in common with a man of that type. There's nothing barbarian about me."

"But still you might have a barbarian lover," he persisted. "Love doesn't always trouble itself as to whether a man and woman have tastes in common. It just tangles them up—

and there they are! Besides"—a look of sardonic amusement crossing his face—"you've got certain quite well-developed barbarous instincts, you know."

"I?"—in blank astonishment. "I'm sure I haven't."

"Yes, you have"—composedly. "When you dress up for a dance and make yourself look your very best, you're really no better than the tribeswoman who adorns herself with coloured glass beads and a ring in her nose to attract a mate. There's nothing to choose between you."

"How utterly absurd! Women—civilized women—don't dress to please men. That's merely"—with sweeping scorn—"masculine conceit."

"Well, then, why *do* women spend hours over their toilette and try to make themselves lovely for a dance? I'm sure you won't mind gratifying my masculine curiosity—or, should I have said, enlightening my masculine ignorance?"

"We dress for other women"—shortly.

Lorimer shrugged his shoulders.

"Yet—pardon my drawing attention to the fact—you dance exclusively with other men."

"For our own self-respect, then."

"A neat coat-frock"—he suggested banteringly. "That would surely meet the claims of self-respect."

Patricia's irritation flared up.

"Oh, you're impossible!" she exclaimed, with a little stamp of her foot. "Why *shouldn't* we want to look nice?"

"You should, you should!" he agreed with maddening cordiality. "It's a primitive instinct—as I told you!"—triumphantly.

As he finished speaking, the Commissioner and Noel reappeared, brimming over with details relating to the size and beauty of the tiger's skin, and the conversation became general. To Patricia the interruption was a welcome one. Although she would not for worlds have acknowledged it, she had a distinct feeling that she was getting the worst of the

argument with Lorimer—and she felt proportionately annoyed and irritated. He was a most difficult person to discuss things with, she reflected—quite abominably stubborn and self-opinionated, and he had, moreover, a disagreeable faculty for driving home the points of his argument either with a sledge-hammer blow that left you feeling almost stunned or with a sudden rapier-like thrust that took your breath away by its sheer unexpectedness and audacity.

As far as possible she refrained from addressing him throughout the remainder of the evening, leaving the bulk of the conversation to the three men, and, when finally he declared he must be taking his way homewards, she bade him a somewhat chilly farewell.

It was not until he had actually quitted the tent, and was striding across towards where a *syce* stood holding his horse in readiness, that she recollected she had never expressed any gratitude for the timely shot which had saved her from imminent death. In an instant her annoyance with him vanished, swept aside by a swift sense of dismay at her own remissness. She ran out of the tent just in time to see him moving off from the camp.

“Mr. Lorimer!” Her voice carried easily through the still, clear air, and Kerry reined in his horse and turned back.

“Miss Luttrell!” he exclaimed with some surprise. “What is it? What can I do for you?”

“It isn’t what you can do. It’s what you *have* done,” she replied whimsically. “You saved my life this afternoon—and I’ve never even said thank you! I don’t know what you must think of me”—penitently.

“I never thought about it,” he returned with his usual brusqueness. “I did just what anyone else would have done who’d been on the spot.”

“They might have missed their shot, though,” she suggested, a gleam of mirth in her eyes.

He shook his head.

"People don't miss—when it's a matter of life or death," he said bluntly.

"Well, I'm very glad you didn't," she replied. "And please let me say 'thank you,' won't you? I feel very heavily in your debt."

"You need not," he returned curtly. "After all, I took the privilege of telling you some home-truths afterwards. You'd better put my one good deed against my many evil speeches and strike a balance."

"I think the balance would be all in favour of the one good deed," she answered good-humouredly. "Anyhow, I'm really very grateful to you, Mr. Lorimer. It's quite nice to find myself still alive, you know."

"Please say no more about it. Your father gave me all the thanks I need."

He spoke with an abrupt indifference that waived her thanks away into the limbo of entirely unimportant things. She felt suddenly snubbed, and stood watching him ride away from the camp with brooding eyes. No other man of her acquaintance would have treated her like that, she reflected, as she turned back and re-entered the tent. As a rule they were ready to accept whatever she chose to bestow, whether of praise or censure, and if she showed herself displeased over anything they were only too anxious to make friends again when she graciously signified her willingness to do so.

But as far as Kerry Lorimer was concerned, he made it quite evident that he didn't care in the smallest degree whether he won her approval or otherwise. In fact, as she confessed to herself with a rueful smile, he really behaved as though it appeared to him only a matter of relatively slight importance whether the tiger had killed her outright or not.

Apparently women—the women of ordinary civilized existence—occupied a very small place in his thoughts.

He had given her to understand that quite clearly. From the very outset he had implied that there could be nothing in common betwixt himself and a woman of her environment. It was as though he had been deliberately trying to show her that there could never be any friendship between them—to erect a wall betwixt himself and her. Only once throughout the hail of rather contemptuous raillery did it seem to her that the real man had shown himself for a brief instant. "*It's the big, primitive things that count,*" he had said. "*Courage to face life, and love to sweeten it.*"

That he himself had found the courage to face life, she felt sure. It was written in every strong, firm-drawn line of his lean face and in the mercilessly keen, direct eyes. But of the love that keeps life sweet there was no sign. Had he found it—and lost it again, she wondered? Or had he of set purpose ruled it out of his own individual scheme of existence?

She became all at once irately conscious of how much the man was occupying her thoughts. Snatching up the first book that came to hand—it happened to be a weighty volume dealing with the administration of civil law in India—she focused her attention on it desperately, to the forcible exclusion of Kerry Lorimer and all his works.

CHAPTER VI

BLUE DANDY'S BLUNDER

TEN days later the Luttrells returned home from camp, and Patricia was immediately caught up once more into the stream of gaieties which constituted social life at Coomara. Usually, after the quiet and comparatively simple existence in camp, she found herself bubbling over with riotous enjoyment of her busy round of engagements, but this time she was conscious of an odd, lingering regret that the weeks spent under canvas had come to an end.

Following upon that first eventful occasion of the tiger-shoot Kerry Lorimer had visited the camp frequently—either on his own initiative or by the Commissioner's suggestion, and the aversion which Patricia assured herself he inspired in her had perceptibly diminished. She still resented his brusqueness, and, above all, the species of half-mocking raillery which he seemed to reserve entirely for her especial delectation, but nevertheless, there was something about the man which compelled her to a certain fugitive, unwilling admiration—some quality of inherent strength that dominated her in spite of herself.

He was so illimitably sure of himself that, even while that very sureness served to aggravate her, it gave her an oddly grudging sense of confidence in him. More than once, when they had disagreed hotly over some matter under discussion, circumstances had eventually combined to prove him right. On the first of these occasions she hastened to admit the fact in her usual generous, impulsive fashion.

"You were right, after all, you see," she told him—only to be immensely taken aback by his ungracious reception of her frank acknowledgment.

"I never for one moment supposed I was not," he returned indifferently.

"Well, I certainly thought you weren't," she urged in extenuation of her previous attitude over the matter.

"Did you? That only shows how mistaken even intellectuals like yourself can be on occasion," he replied judicially.

"I don't know whether you know it," she observed, stung by his cool assumption of superiority, "but you're treating me exactly as though I were a child."

He shook his head.

"You were never more mistaken. I'm not treating you at all as a child. At least, not as I should treat a child."

Soon afterwards she had the opportunity of verifying that statement. An English doctor, known to the Commissioner, had been held up at a *dâk* bungalow, situated a few miles distant from the camp, by the sudden illness of his wife, and at Luttrell's suggestion he and Patricia, accompanied by Lorimer, had ridden out to see what assistance they could offer. They found the doctor haggard from twenty-four hours' unremitting watching by his wife's bedside, while his daughter, a fluffy-haired, blue-eyed mite of six, sat in the middle of the floor of the adjoining room and wailed disconsolately.

Patricia flew to comfort her, but with an imperious "Give the child to me," Lorimer had gathered the small creature up into his arms, and in five minutes had effected a metamorphosis which left Patricia almost gasping with amazement. From a sobbing, quivering bundle of nerves and temper the child was transformed into a chuckling, dimpling little person who crooned contentedly against his big shoulder and tugged at his hair, interspersing this occupation with an occasional unsolicited embrace.

"You're a shocking young flirt," he assured her gravely. To which she merely responded by an ecstatic gurgle of "Big man! Nice big man!" and swept him a butterfly kiss with a brush of long golden lashes against his tanned cheek.

The little incident lingered in Patricia's memory, side by side with other happenings which had flashed fresh sidelights on the strangely complex character of the Commissioner's "mystery man." Even after her return to Coomara it recurred at inconsequent moments. She would never have credited him with either the tenderness or the understanding he had shown in dealing with the forlorn little atom of humanity they had encountered at the *dâk* bungalow. Certainly he had evinced none of the same qualities in his dealings with herself. The reflection raised a vexed feeling of rebellion in her. Why should he behave so differently from other men—treat her with that sort of patronizing, half-amused mockery which she found so galling? And now, after being permitted to come and go at the camp with all the freedom of an admitted friend, he had ever since elected to keep away, off-handedly putting an abrupt end to the growing intimacy.

It was all on a par with the rest of his behaviour, she reflected resentfully—exactly the kind of churlishness one might have expected from him. Although she would not admit it, even to herself, she felt more than a trifle hurt and sore at his continued absence. Wrangle as they might—and did—when they were together, there was yet some strange thread of attraction of which she felt the pull.

"Mr. Lorimer seems to have completely deserted us," she commented one day to her father, as she busied herself arranging flowers.

Luttrell glanced across at her with a gleam of humour in his eyes, and philosophically laid down a report which had just come in and upon which he was engaged at the moment.

"Do you miss him?" he inquired.

"Miss him? Oh, no"—quickly. "I don't know him well enough to miss him. Only—after seeing so much of him when we were camping—it seems odd that he never comes

to see you now we're home. I suppose there just happened to be a lot to report to you while we were away."

"On the contrary, there was very little. Nothing at all, in fact, after that first day when he arrived on the scene so opportunely. I think we may regard Lorimer's visits to us in camp as"—a fleeting smile crossed his face—"as purely social."

Patricia flushed suddenly for no very apparent reason.

"I didn't know he ever deigned to be 'purely social,'" she observed rather coldly. "Anyway, he seems unable to keep it up."

"I never expected he would, once we had got back to Coomara," returned her father. "I don't suppose he'd come here, even if I suggested it——"

"Suggested it? I should hope you wouldn't think of doing that!" she said hastily.

"Why not?"—mildly. "If you'd like to see him——"

"I? Why ever should I? Of course I don't want to see him"—with immense decision.

"Then that settles it." Luttrell composedly picked up his report once more and prepared to resume its perusal.

"We disagree far too strongly on almost every subject under the sun for me to wish to see him particularly," added Patricia.

"Just so," acquiesced her father in imperturbable tones.

She shot a swift side-glance at him, then, putting a final touch to the bowl of flowers she was arranging at the moment, she carried it into an adjoining room. Not for worlds would she have had her father suspect that she took the remotest interest in Kerry Lorimer or his doings.

As though still further to emphasize the fact, she flung herself with apparently even more zest than usual into the regulation round of tennis, polo, dinners and dances where-with Coomara kept stagnation successfully at bay. Even Jim O'Halleran, accustomed as he was to the meteor-like

course of her engagements, professed himself mildly astonished at her tireless enthusiasm.

"By Jove, Pat, your energy is positively amazing," he commented lazily one afternoon, as they strolled up together from the tennis-courts towards the club-house. Patricia had just played three consecutive sets, wresting the victory from her opponents in two out of the three. "You make the rest of us seem as if we led a species of bath-chair existence. What's possessed you lately?"

"Oh, I hate doing nothing," she replied rather vaguely. By this time they had reached the veranda and she perched herself on the end of a *chaise-longue*. "Do bring me a lemon-squash, Jim," she added. "I'm simply dying of thirst."

He nodded and went off in search of the desired refreshment, returning shortly carrying a tall glass in which the ice clinked refreshingly. Patricia took a long drink, while O'Halleran stood looking down at her thoughtfully.

"You're not playing any more to-day, are you?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head. "But I must fly back home directly. I promised to ride with Captain Weatherley this evening."

"What! Aren't three sets of tennis enough to work off your superabundant energy? My dear child"—he sat down beside her as he spoke—"it's perfectly absurd going on like this. Flesh and blood won't stand it."

"Mine will," she retorted gaily. "After all, there isn't very much flesh to be considered in the matter."

His glance rested a moment on the slim, boyish grace of her figure.

"I think," he said slowly, "there's even less than there used to be. You're overdoing it, Pat. Ever since you and the Commissioner came back from camp, you've been doing about as much as any two other women in the station put together. And it can't be done, you know—not in this climate."

"Nonsense, Jim. You're talking like some livery old colonel. It *can* be done—because I'm doing it, and enjoying the process."

Her eyes mocked him provocatively—a blue flash of laughter between black-fringed lids.

Jim lit a cigarette and inhaled a few whiffs of smoke before he spoke again.

"Do you mind," he said at last, slowly, "just outlining for my benefit your programme for the next few days?"

"With all the pleasure in life. In half an hour, a ride with Captain Weatherley, then a foursome dinner at the Residency." She ticked off the items on her fingers. "To-morrow morning I believe I've promised to let that nice Rochester boy take me for a run in his brand-new two-seater, and in the afternoon I go to watch my respected parent play polo—I think he requires family support on these occasions. Afterwards we're dining with the Grants. The next day is a sort of mix-up of shopping and tennis—oh, and there's the Dexters' moonlight picnic that night. And so on," she wound up airily.

"And they call women the weaker sex!" commented O'Halleran.

Patricia, having finished her lemon-squash, jumped up from the *chaise-longue*.

"I must go now, Jim. I've got to hurry into riding-kit."

He nodded.

"All right. I'll drive you back, shall I?"

She acquiesced, and a few minutes later his car whirled them up to the Residency gates.

"Good-bye. No, stay where you are"—and Patricia sprang lightly down into the roadway. "And don't bother to cultivate grey hairs on my account! I love having heaps to do. As I told Mr. Lorimer when we were in camp, the 'simple life' wouldn't suit my constitution one bit."

O'Halleran's mouth relaxed into a smile.

"I don't believe it would," he admitted. "Good-bye, then,

till to-morrow—I shall see you down at the polo-ground in the afternoon?”

“Rather. I always go when the Sahib is disporting himself there.” With a smile and a friendly wave of her hand, she vanished between the portals of the Residency.

It was a beautiful afternoon, the heat pleasantly tempered by a faint film of cloud which veiled the dazzling blaze of the sun, and a gay and talkative crowd had assembled down at the Coomara polo-ground. There were still a few minutes to elapse before the time at which the game was scheduled to begin, and Patricia stood chatting with her father and O'Halleran, who were playing on opposing sides.

“It's really very trying of you to be in opposite teams,” she complained, wrinkling up her brows. “I can't give you *both* my blessing! And naturally”—turning to Major O'Halleran—“I want father's side to win—for the credit of the family.”

Jim laughed good-humouredly.

“Of course you do. And equally of course I shall do my utmost to prevent it.”

“I should hope you would,” she returned heartily. Other considerations never obscured Patricia's sense of fair play. “It would be absurd if you didn't. Well, good luck—to you both!” And bestowing a parting pat on the gleaming neck of Blue Dandy, the Commissioner's pony, she made her way back to her seat in the pavilion, next that of the Grants, and was soon absorbed in watching the progress of the game.

The ground was solid as a board, and as the ponies raced and swerved and skidded, with ever a practised eye on the rocketing ball, their hoofs clattered a tattoo on the hard surface.

“Your father's playing well,” commented Colonel Grant, following the Commissioner's lean figure as it flashed hither and thither, supple and alert as that of many a younger man.

Patricia nodded and bent forward, watching every stroke with unconcealed eagerness. It was one of her quarrels with fate that polo was more or less a masculine monopoly and that she was always compelled to enjoy it at second-hand in the guise of a mere spectator.

Suddenly the ball shot towards the goal her father's team was defending and she held her breath in momentary suspense, then gave a little gasp of relief as Luttrell, with a neat, clean-cut stroke, sent it whizzing back again across the ground. A cheer went up from the onlookers, and Patricia clapped delightedly.

"Well played, Sahib!" she whispered under her breath. Then, the tense excitement of the moment abating, she turned to answer Colonel Grant.

"Yes, he does play well, doesn't he?" she agreed with whole-hearted ardour. "I only wish he had time to play oftener. He never really has a chance to get into proper form."

"It's a pity he can't. Because it's a bit of a strain on a man, playing irregularly like that—particularly when he throws himself into the game with such fervour as Luttrell does."

"Oh, father's as fit as anything," she said. "You should see him when we're in camp. He can do as long a day as anyone."

"Polo's rather a different matter, though," returned Colonel Grant. "It's practice—practice of eye and hand, and that oneness of understanding which grows up between a man and the ponies he's playing regularly."

But Patricia was hardly listening. The ball was now skimming towards the enemy's goal, Luttrell, on Blue Dandy, streaking headlong after it with a bunch of scudding ponies at his heels. As they raced by in a cloud of dust, hoofs drumming, the crowd cheered and clapped anew. A goal for the Commissioner's team looked a certainty. Then, with an unerring smack, O'Halleran's stick met the ball and it

came flying back once more. Simultaneously the ponies checked and wheeled. But the pace had been tremendous, and the sudden check brought havoc. Hoarse shouts and cries uprose, crossed by the rattle of clashing sticks and the shrill, hysterical scream of a woman in the crowd. For a moment a wild huddle of men and plunging, scuffling horses rocked and swayed together in indescribable confusion. Then they broke clear, leaving a man's figure lying prone upon the ground, while Blue Dandy scrambled riderless to his feet and stood limping on three legs, snorting with pain and terror.

A momentary hush of dismay descended on the watching crowd, breaking all at once into a buzz of sharp, staccato questions as that prone figure in the centre of the ground still lay there, inert and motionless. Patricia, her eyes straining towards it, rose slowly in her place, every drop of colour ebbing from her face. Her hands gripped the rail in front of her.

"Sahib! . . . Sahib! . . ." To herself it seemed as though she were shrieking the word, but all that actually left her lips was a mere thread of sound—a thin, dry whisper of horror.

The polo-players were crowding up round the man who lay so terribly still and silent in their midst—dismounting hurriedly, with anxious faces. One of them knelt and slipped an arm beneath his head. Followed the sound of swiftly padding footsteps—four natives crossing the ground, bearing an ambulance, while Major Ackroyd, the regimental doctor, ran ahead of them at top speed. Meanwhile, some of the crowd, agog with ghoulish curiosity, had broken through the ropes that fenced them off the polo-ground, only to be driven back by excited native police.

Patricia still clung stiffly to the railing, her stricken eyes riveted on the little group in the centre of the ground. Her slight figure was rigid. It seemed to her as though her limbs had suddenly become numb and powerless, held fast in the

grip of some invisible vice. Then she felt Colonel Grant's hand on her arm, touching her with a grave kindliness. With the consciousness of that human touch, the dreadful clutch which had held her still and voiceless relaxed. She turned swiftly.

"Is he killed?" she cried chokingly.

"No, no, surely not." The Colonel tried to speak reassuringly, but there was a terrible doubt in his voice. "Don't think of such a thing. He's probably merely stunned. Blue Dandy blundered badly as they checked, and I'm rather afraid he rolled on the Commissioner when they fell. But even so, it may be only a matter of a broken rib or two."

Patricia, an overwhelming fear at her heart, stretched out a groping hand, and he took it and held it firmly in his.

"Take me to him," she said simply.

CHAPTER VII

THE WINGS OF DEATH

PATRICIA sat very still on the veranda, staring listlessly in front of her. The doctors had given their verdict, and there was no hope—no hope at all. Her beloved Sahib would never recover from the injuries he had received. It seemed that not only had Blue Dandy rolled on him when they came down together, but that in the general scrimmage which followed that sudden check in yesterday's game one of the other ponies had trampled upon him as he lay on the ground, and the internal injuries inflicted were of such a nature as to place the Commissioner beyond reach of surgical aid.

They had broken it to her very gently. O'Halleran had been deputed to fulfil the difficult task, and neither now nor ever would she be able to forget his infinite gentleness and sympathy. But all the sympathy in the world could not help her just then. At first she had refused to believe the terrible truth. "They must be able to do something for him—they *must!*" she had reiterated piteously. "They can't—they can't let him die!" But by this time she knew that nothing could be done—nothing beyond drugging him into temporary respite from pain when the agony grew too intolerable to be borne. He might linger a day . . . two days . . . perhaps more. None could say how long or short the time might be. And Patricia, who had seen him once when the pain was at its fiercest, prayed steadily that it might not be the longer period.

He was asleep now—tranquil at last in the drug-induced slumber which was all his tortured body would let him know of sleep—and she had stolen out of his room on to the

veranda to try and face things out by herself. She could hardly envisage life without her father. The bond between them had been so much deeper than that usually implied by the relationship of father and daughter. They had been close comrades, friends in the deepest sense of the word, and it seemed to Patricia as though when Luttrell went, everything else went too. She would be left alone in a world of shadows. But even so, although her heart ached till the anguish seemed almost as much a physical as a mental pain, she still prayed voicelessly, with white lips, that he might die soon—soon. Anything rather than a repetition of that unbearable suffering which she had witnessed an hour ago!

Previously, before the pain had absorbed all his faculties in one supreme and terrible struggle for endurance, he had asked for Lorimer. Somehow it had hurt her that in these last few hours which were left to them on earth together he could think of anyone so remote and outside their mutual life—could wish to waste even a few of the precious moments still remaining upon a man who was surely no more than a mere instrument, ready to the Commissioner's hand for the better understanding and ruling of the District.

But Luttrell had been very insistent, and, hurt though it might, Patricia was ready to do anything, make any effort, to gratify what seemed to her no more than a sick man's whim. The difficulty was that she had no idea where Kerry Lorimer was to be found, and her feeling of resentful irritation against him, on account of his indifferent attitude since she and her father had returned to Coomara, flared up anew into fresh life. If only he had troubled to keep in touch with them, she would have been able to send word to him immediately.

From Luttrell himself she had been unable to extract any clue concerning Kerry's whereabouts. Perhaps he hardly understood her; he had been in too nerveless and exhausted a condition to be questioned overmuch. Sometimes his mind

had seemed to wander a little. But the restless, low-voiced repetition, "Lorimer—I'd like to see him," which came at intervals from his lips, filled Patricia with a fierce longing to procure the fulfilment of his wish. There would be so few more wishes of his in this world that she could ever gratify.

She had telephoned both to Colonel Grant and to O'Halleran, asking if they could help her in the matter, but neither of them had been able to supply the necessary information. Nor, search her father's desk as she might for any note or odd letter which should chance to contain Lorimer's address, could she discover anything of the kind. Her quest proved barren. She had even gone out into the roadway, in the forlorn hope that the old native, whom she now knew to have been none other than Lorimer himself, might be in his accustomed corner at the Residency gates. But there was no sign of him. Only a one-armed beggar—the genuine article, this time—came cringing up to her, soliciting alms.

After that, she had abandoned the search in despair; she was at the end of her resources. Arms resting on the veranda balustrade, she sat gazing out towards the horizon, wondering wearily where, in all that wide expanse of plain and distant hills, Lorimer had pitched his solitary camp. And even as the question formulated itself in her mind there came the sound of quick, purposeful steps and Kerry himself strode round the curve of the drive and approached the veranda. With a little cry, she sprang to her feet.

"You? . . . You? . . ." she stammered.

"Yes. How is he?"

He offered no conventional greeting, and, overwhelmed by the grief and anxiety of the moment, Patricia failed even to notice the omission. She answered the simple directness of his question with a simplicity equally direct.

"He can't live," she said.

Kerry looked at her—at the white, drawn face and tearless eyes—and his mouth contracted suddenly. But he made

no comment, proffered no commonplace words of condolence, and for that she inwardly thanked him.

"Can I see him?" he demanded abruptly.

"He's asleep now. But when he wakes you can. He's—he's been asking for you." The acknowledgment came reluctantly.

"Has he?" Then, still with his usual brusqueness: "Where can I wait?"

"Won't you wait here—with me?" She spoke rather tremulously. His bluntness troubled her—hurt her a little. "They will tell me the moment he awakes, and then you can go in to him."

He nodded and joined her on the veranda, and for a few minutes a heavy silence fell between them.

"How did you hear—that there had been an accident?" she ventured at last, when the silence had grown unbearable.

Lorimer was sitting motionless, gazing out towards the horizon, as she herself had been doing at the moment of his arrival. His sunburnt face looked curiously pinched and drawn about the lips as he turned towards her.

"I don't know whether you have any knowledge of my work here, Miss Luttrell?"

"A little," she admitted quietly. "My father told me that you—helped him."

"Well, I know most of what goes on in this District. It's my job to know. And I've means of my own of finding out things—messengers who will bring me word at once. Queer messengers you'd think them, some of them, no doubt. But they've served my purpose. . . . And I've made it part of my business *always* to know whether things were well or ill with your father." He bent forward, and she saw that his lean brown hand was gripping the arm of his chair so hard that the knuckles showed bone-white beneath the tanned skin. "Luttrell has been my best friend," he said. Adding shortly: "My *only* friend would be nearer the truth."

Patricia was startled. She had not imagined that any

actual bond of personal friendship existed between this man and her father, but there was no mistaking the note of emotion which suddenly deepened his tones.

"He's been my best friend, too," she said simply. "Always. And now"—with sudden generosity she paid toll to that note of intense feeling which had sounded in his voice—"and now—we're both—going to lose him."

"Nothing can be done?" he queried sharply.

"Nothing."

After that, they fell silent once more. There was so little that could be said, so pitifully little that could be done! They could only wait and pray that the man on whom Death's summons had fallen might, when the moment came, find the passing easy.

Presently, after what seemed an interminable length of time, a woman in nurse's uniform came out on to the veranda.

"He's awake—and asking for you, Miss Luttrell," she said gently. Her eyes were very pitiful.

Patricia rose.

"I will come back," she said to Lorimer as she followed the nurse into the house.

She returned almost immediately.

"He will see you," she stated flatly. Her lips were white as she reseated herself, her eyes hostile.

Lorimer stooped over her.

"I understand how you feel," he said quietly. "But try not to grudge me these few moments of him."

He did not wait for an answer, but walked rapidly along the veranda to the room where Luttrell lay, leaving Patricia to resume her lonely vigil.

Another long period of waiting crawled by. It was all she could do to remain where she was and yield those incomparably precious minutes to Kerry Lorimer. But, somehow, his unexpected understanding of the sacrifice it entailed had made it easier. "*My only friend would be nearer the truth.*" The brief sentence, uttered in that curious hard-held tone,

gave him certain rights—rights which no suffering fellow human being could deny.

Presently the tension grew too strong for her. She got up and began pacing restlessly to and fro on the veranda. Once, half unconsciously, drawn by her aching longing to be with him, she paused outside her father's room. From behind the *chick* came the sound of voices. Lorimer was speaking—evidently in answer to something her father had said.

"No, Luttrell, I'll work for no other man. You've known the whole truth about me and believed in me in spite of it. So you'll understand. If you go out this journey"—his voice was roughened and not quite steady—"then I've finished with India."

Patricia drew back hastily. She had had no intention of eavesdropping. But the hoarsely spoken words had penetrated her consciousness, and vaguely she found herself grappling with a new thought. "*You've known the whole truth about me and believed in me in spite of it.*" What truth? What had Lorimer meant? Had he been guilty of something which gave men reason to doubt him? And had her father trusted him where another man would have withheld his trust? It certainly sounded like that. And—her mind insensibly jumped to the logic of it—some such happening in the past would account for his peculiar mode of life—the strangely solitary existence which he chose to lead, practically cut off from his fellow-men.

At that moment Kerry himself emerged from the room where the Commissioner was lying, and all other thoughts were instantly swept away by the supreme fact that she was free now to go back to her father. Without even pausing to speak as she passed him, she drew aside the *chick* and re-entered the half-darkened room.

"Sahib!" The word came falteringly, filled with the aching longing of love which knows it must soon be utterly bereft.

"That you, Pat?" Luttrell's voice sounded considerably stronger than when she had last seen him, exhausted by a long bout of suffering. Refreshed by his sleep, and for the moment comparatively free from pain, he spoke so naturally and with so much his usual jolly, good-humoured intonation, that for an instant it almost seemed to her as though no horrible accident could have befallen him—as though time had slipped back and she were just coming in, as she had been wont to do almost every morning, to tell him that *chota hazri*¹ was waiting for them on the veranda. And then the sight of his recumbent body, with that significant hump in the middle of the bed where a cradle held the weight of the bedclothes away from him, brought back to her in a rush the realization of the dreadful truth. Never again would they laugh and joke together like a couple of children over their *chota hazri*.

"Come over here, old thing, close by me. I want to talk to you." Luttrell was speaking again with unabated cheerfulness, and Patricia went and kneeled beside the bed.

"You'd better pull up a chair," he suggested. "I've got quite a lot of things I want to say to you, and you'll be broken-kneed before I finish if you stay there on your marrow-bones all the time."

"Do you think you ought to talk so much?" asked Patricia anxiously as she seated herself.

He gave a little grin.

"If I don't do it now, while that confounded pain is taking an hour off, I mayn't be able to do it at all, my dear. And anyway, when you're as near the next world as I am, there's no object in husbanding your strength. They'll probably have a new supply waiting for me when I get there. At least, I hope so"—whimsically. "The lot I have at present won't go far."

Patricia tried to speak and failed, her voice breaking on a caught-back sob.

¹ *Chota hazri*: little breakfast.

"Yes"—Luttrell nodded understandingly—"I know it's rough on you, dear old thing, being left behind. I wish I could take you with me. That's the only thing I mind—leaving you. But, as it's got to be, let's look the thing in the face and not funk it. I want to talk to you about—afterwards."

"Oh, Sahib! . . . *Don't!*" she cried in a wrung voice.

"My dear, it's necessary. You must know what's going to happen to you."

"I don't care what happens to me!"—passionately.

"But I care. In fact, it's pretty much the only thing I do care about. You'll have to start all over again, you know. And I want you to make that start in England."

"Why in England?"

"Because it's your country, and you've seen precious little of it. Every one should get to know and love their own country some time or other in their lives. Beyond that, it's where your godfather, Marchdale, lives, and as you and I are singularly devoid of relatives, he's the sheet-anchor I've always had in my mind for you, if anything happened to knock me out."

"Perhaps he won't have quite the same views," suggested Patricia. "He may have no particular ambition to play the part of 'sheet-anchor.'"

From all that she knew of the present Lord Marchdale, she thought it highly improbable that he would. She had never seen him, always having spent her English school vacations with a sister of her father's, since dead, but she recollected having heard that he was a highly autocratic old gentleman, who suffered from frequent attacks of gout and irascible temper—acidity and ill-humour being hereditary characteristics of the Earls of Marchdale.

"He'll play the part all right," said Luttrell. "He once"—his voice softened—"loved your mother."

Patricia gazed at her father in astonishment.

"Do you mean," she said, "that godfather wanted to—to marry mother?"

Luttrell nodded his head.

"It's not so surprising, is it?" he asked with a note of tender amusement in his voice. "She was very—lovable," he added simply.

"But godfather must have been years and years older than she was!" she protested, still half incredulous.

Again her father nodded.

"He was—more than twenty years older. But"—smiling a little—"twenty years isn't an insuperable barrier against love, you know."

"So *that's* why he's my godfather!" The information just imparted to her had cleared up one or two points which had often puzzled her at fugitive moments. Above all, it supplied a reason why Lord Marchdale should occupy this particular relation towards her.

"That's why," assented Luttrell. "He wanted it very much, so your mother and I consented. Afterwards, in an odd, resentful kind of way, I think he regretted being godfather to a child of mine, for he never asked to see you when you were sent home to England. But, after Barbara's death, he wrote to me saying that if ever you were left alone in the world your home was to be at Strangways. And now, that time's come." Patricia's hands closed convulsively on each other in a wild effort at self-control, and he laid his own hand comfortingly above them. Afterwards, she remembered how curiously cold the touch of his hand had felt against hers.

"I've had a cable sent to Marchdale," he went on. His voice seemed suddenly to waver, and he gasped a little between the words. The nurse, standing watchfully in a distant corner of the room, came noiselessly across to the bedside.

"Mr. Luttrell," she protested gently. "I think you've talked enough for the present. You must rest a little now."

He shook his head, smiling at her.

"I shall have plenty of time to rest—afterwards," he answered. "And there are things that must be said. Give me another five minutes, nurse."

He turned back to Patricia, as the nurse reluctantly retreated to the further side of the room once more.

"Yes, Marchdale has been cabled," he repeated, speaking with obviously increasing difficulty. "You'll hear from him, Pat—certain to. But remember, if you're not happy at Strangways, he isn't your legal guardian. You're quite . . . free. And then——" He panted and strove to raise himself in the bed, as though to ease his difficult breathing. The movement caused him exquisite agony, and beads of sweat burst out on his forehead. His hands clutched spasmodically at the bedclothes.

Before Patricia could even signal to her, the nurse was at his side, endeavouring to pour a few drops of restorative between his twisted lips. But he shook his head, and his eyes again sought Patricia's. She slipped her arm round him.

"Sahib——" Her voice was almost inaudible.

He smiled faintly—that familiar little smile of his, half tender, half whimsical.

"Going, Pat. Lorimer . . . he'll help you . . . in any difficulty."

He gasped out the words. Then his head fell back against her shoulder, and a minute later his spirit had passed on, his last thought characteristically given to the child of the woman he had worshipped.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BURYING OF THE HATCHET

“**T**HE Commissioner-*sahib* is gone.” The news ran through the place like a sighing wind, and the low, dirge-like wailing of the native servants of the Residency testified to the fact that, although he had been a strict disciplinarian, Luttrell had been greatly loved.

Patricia had found the days which immediately succeeded her father’s death a period of long drawn-out strain. She could not even be alone with her sorrow, as another woman might have been. There was so much to see to and determine, so many formalities in connexion with the funeral about which, in deference to her relationship to the late head of the District, she must needs be consulted by those whose task it was to arrange matters.

Accustomed though she was to the necessities of official routine, it had all seemed to her somewhat petty and puerile in the face of the great and solemn fact of death—a rather ruthless trespass on her own private sorrow. But through it all she had borne herself with a fine courage and self-control, true to her sense of duty as the Commissioner’s daughter.

And now at length it was over—even the last heart-shaking details, the farewells to rooms in which she and her beloved Sahib had laughed and been happy together, the poignant final glimpses of dumb chairs and tables that had made an intrinsic part of “home,” the leave-takings from old and trusted servants who had seen her grow from child to woman. The doors of the Residency closed behind her for the last time, and with their closing began a new untravelled road—a road which she must learn to tread alone.

It was not until then that the spirit which had carried her bravely through the ordeal of the last few days deserted

her. The reaction from the intense strain she had undergone set in, and the day after she arrived at the Grants' bungalow, where it had been arranged she should stay till she could start for England, she went down with a low fever.

Mrs. Grant, who had been with her throughout those final trying days at the Residency, nursed her devotedly, but it was not until nearly a fortnight had elapsed that Patricia was well enough to leave her room and sit out on the veranda, propped up with cushions in a *chaise-longue*. At first she seemed unable to fight her way back to a normal grip upon life. There were times when the realization that her father was actually dead completely failed her—when she would start up involuntarily, thinking that she could hear his footstep. Then the dreadful truth would close down on her like a pall, and she would sink back into her chair, overwhelmed afresh by her sense of irreparable loss.

But, at length, as the weeks wore on, the resilience of youth triumphed over both grief and illness, and she began to take hold of the threads of her life once more—feebly, at first, it is true, but day by day with increasing courage and determination. And finally the time came when she could broach the subject of her return to England. Mrs. Grant was disposed to demur, protesting that a longer rest would be advisable before undertaking such a journey. She had grown very much attached to Patricia during the weeks the girl had spent at her bungalow and viewed the idea of her departure with dismay.

"I don't know what I shall do without you," she told her regretfully. "I was almost beginning to feel as if I had a grown-up daughter of my own. Wouldn't it be wiser to wait a little longer before fixing a definite date? I don't think you're really fit, yet, to make the journey by yourself. You've never been used to travelling alone, remember."

A shadow darkened Patricia's eyes. She remembered only too well.

"I shall have to get used to it—now," she answered rather

low. "So the sooner I make a start the better. And in any case"—smiling—"I can't quarter myself on you and Colonel Grant indefinitely. You've been unutterably good to me, as it is."

Mrs. Grant's thin, pretty, rather tired face flushed warmly.

"My dear, I only wish we could have done more," she said with simplicity.

Patricia had received a cable from Lord Marchdale, endorsing all that Luttrell had told her concerning her godfather's desire that she should make her home with him, and this had been followed by a letter from the old Earl's sister, Lady Mary Wynsborough, who, it appeared, lived with her brother at Strangways and kept his house in order for him. Patricia found the sloping, pointed handwriting, with its light upstrokes and delicately flourished capitals oddly attractive. It seemed to convey a sense of old-world sweetness and distinction, which the wording of the letter served but to emphasize. There was a touch of bygone times about its gentle courtesy, its sensitive reference to Patricia's "bereavement," and through it all there ran an undercurrent of wistful welcome—as though the coming of a young girl to the great grey house of Strangways were half-eagerly, half-shrinkingly anticipated.

Colonel Grant reluctantly assented to Patricia's proposal that she should return to England in April.

"We shall miss you badly," he said. "But I think you're right to go then and escape the hot weather. An English summer will do you no end of good. But it's a pity you don't know of any friends going Home at the same time, so that you could have had someone to travel with. Perhaps we may hear of somebody yet."

They did not, however, and when, after the paying of innumerable farewell visits and the packing of many trunks and boxes, the day of departure at last came round, it was with rather a forlorn sense of loneliness that Patricia, accompanied by the Grants, drove down to the station.

"I feel like a waif and stray going out alone into the wide world," she said, with a plucky attempt at a smile which defied the mist that clouded her eyes. "Dear India! I wonder if I shall ever see her again?"

"Why, of course." Mrs. Grant patted her hand affectionately. "Of course you will. You'll come out to us next cold weather—or, if Lord Marchdale won't spare you so soon, then the one after."

"And ultimately, of course," supplemented Colonel Grant cheerily, "we shall all follow you back to England. That's the best of Indian friendships. They get splintered and broken all over the place while we're out here, but we can knit them up again later on in the old country. We all go Home eventually—when our time's up."

Patricia wondered whether she should ever encounter Kerry Lorimer in England. He had not been near her since she left the Residency. Presumably the friendship he had felt for Luttrell did not extend itself to the latter's daughter. But even so, he might at least have come to bid her good-bye before she actually quitted India—might have paid her that much courtesy. She felt her throat contract a little. Then, annoyed that anything Lorimer might or might not do should have power to hurt her, she thrust him determinedly out of her thoughts.

Quite a large crowd had assembled at the railway station to give Patricia a send-off. She had the gift of making friends—that gift of "lovableness" which had been so much her mother's, and nothing could have evidenced it more clearly than the fact that practically half Coomara had turned out to bid her good-bye and good luck.

In the background, behind the big gathering of personal friends, peered a line of eager brown faces. The native servants of the dead Commissioner had come to see the last of their beloved "*Miss-sahib*." Patricia, inexpressibly touched, moved from one to another, bestowing a few kindly words on each, rewarded sometimes by a flash of white teeth

parted in a delighted smile, and sometimes, in the case of old and devoted servants, by the deeper tribute of tears coursing unashamedly down furrowed dusky cheeks.

Then came the final good-byes to the throng of friends who had flocked to the station to see her off, and there followed much hand-shaking and embracing until at last a shrill whistle from the engine warned her that she must board the train. It was O'Halleran who helped her in. He had taken his real farewell of her the night before, as for the last time they had strolled together in the Grants' *compound*, and now he let her go with only a tight clasp of the hand and a murmured "God bless you, Pat!" But his face was rather white as he turned away to make room for others who were pressing forward to see the last of the traveller.

As Patricia stood at the open window of her compartment, exchanging final words and tags of conversation, her eyes involuntarily searched the cluster of upturned faces for the one which was missing—the face of Kerry Lorimer. That he must have been thoroughly well acquainted with the fact of her forthcoming departure she had no manner of doubt—he had ways and means of acquiring information which never seemed to fail him—and deep down in her heart there had lingered a little fugitive hope that even at the last moment he might put in an appearance to wish her *bon voyage*. His absence showed her very plainly that he took no interest whatever in her doings—that it was a matter of complete indifference to him whether they ever met again or not.

And then at the very last moment, as the train was actually quivering into motion, she suddenly saw his figure striding along the platform. He came straight through the throng of people grouped outside her window, curtly acknowledging the salutations of the one or two who knew him, and boarded the train exactly as it moved off. For a few moments Patricia remained standing at the window, waving a valedictory hand in response to the fluttering handkerchiefs and lifted hats which still signalled good-bye and God-speed

from the rapidly receding platform. Then, as a curve in the line swept Coomara station out of sight, she sat down and stared blankly round the big empty compartment in which she was travelling, conscious of an intense feeling of loneliness and desolation.

The knowledge that Lorimer was on the same train added to rather than detracted from her sense of forlornness. He had not come to the station to see her off, after all! At first, when she caught sight of him, she thought that he had repented his recent aloofness and had come to bid her a friendly good-bye. But, as he passed her window with only the briefest of salutations and boarded the train lower down, she realized that he had merely come to the station for the prosaic reason that he purposed travelling by that particular train, although to what destination she had, of course, no means of knowing.

Once more she experienced the same sense of being snubbed with which Lorimer had managed to impress her on previous occasions, and she was still absorbed in her somewhat depressing reverie when the train jerked itself to a standstill at the first stopping-place. In India, when a train pulls up at a station, it does so with the full intention of remaining at a standstill for some little time. There is none of the hurry and rush which appertains to a Western railway station—a five minutes' stop, then a slamming of doors, a guard's piercing whistle, and the punctual resumption of the journey. Accordingly, Patricia, well versed in the ways of Indian railway travel, was just preparing herself for a long wait in the solitude of her compartment, when there came the sound of swinging footsteps, the door was thrown open, and Kerry Lorimer's tall figure appeared in the aperture.

"How do you do?" he said politely. "I hope you've no objection to my travelling to Bombay on the same train as yourself?"

"No. Why should I have?" she returned, shaking hands as briefly as possible.

He laughed carelessly.

"No reason at all. Only that I thought you didn't look particularly pleased just now when you caught sight of me."

Patricia, who had risen from her seat at his first appearance, sat down. She felt startled and confused by this sudden encounter.

"I was only—only rather astonished," she stammered.

"I should have imagined that by this time nothing I could do would astonish you," he remarked sardonically. "You've surely given up expecting a normal standard of behaviour from me, haven't you?"

"There's nothing particularly abnormal about going to Bombay, is there?" she retorted.

He gave a short laugh.

"No, I suppose not. We all go Home via Bombay."

"Home?" Once more she could not keep the surprise out of her voice. "Are you going to England, then?"

"Yes. Why not? It's a small country, but it should be big enough to hold us both."

"Mr. Lorimer"—Patricia began with an effort. "Why do you always speak as though—as though"—she faltered, seeking for a word—"as though you didn't want to be friends with me?"

"Do I?" Without asking her permission, he stepped into the carriage and, moving aside her dressing-case, seated himself opposite her. There was a curious sparkling light in his grey eyes—a glint of defiance that you might expect to see in the eyes of a small boy who has suddenly decided to play truant and risk the consequences.

"You know you do," returned Patricia. After a pause she continued a trifle nervously: "Of course, I know you look down—upon society, and on people who live just an ordinary kind of social life. People like me, I mean. But I don't think you need hate me so badly for it. After all, it's not my fault. It's what I was brought up to."

“‘Hate’ you?” he repeated in a curious tone. “You’re rather inverting things. It’s the other way round. I’ve merely realized that a savage—an outsider such as I am—could have no possible claim upon the interest of the leading lady in Coomara.”

“I’m not that now”—quickly.

“No. But possibly”—with a grim significance in his voice—“the barrier between Lord Marchdale’s god-daughter and myself will be an even bigger one than the barrier between me and the lady of the Residency.”

Patricia’s blue eyes flashed.

“I’m not a snob, Mr. Lorimer,” she said in a low tone of anger.

Perhaps he detected the hurt note which lay beneath her anger. He leaned forward.

“Forgive me,” he said quickly. “I didn’t mean that at all.” He broke off abruptly, as though at a loss how to continue.

“Then will you explain—what you did mean?” She was still doubtful of him—still on the defensive.

“I meant just what I said,” he replied at last, quietly. “That there is a wide gulf fixed between Lord Marchdale’s god-daughter and one, Kerry Lorimer, free-lance.” He smiled suddenly. “Don’t let’s say any more about it. Let’s just pretend we’re friends till we get to England.”

Puzzled and bewildered by his manner, Patricia assented hesitatingly. He pounced on her hesitation in a moment.

“You don’t even feel you can do that? Perhaps it’s just as well”—a slightly bitter expression crossed his face. “Well, then, regard me merely as a courier, and let me just look after your material comforts. I promise I won’t intrude on you in any other way.” As though to give colour to his words, he rose, and prepared to leave the compartment. “I’m going back on the same boat as you are, and I dare say”—amiably—“I can make myself useful now and then. I’m an excellent odd-job man.”

"How do you know what boat I'm going on?" she asked swiftly.

But he was no whit disconcerted by the pertinent question.

"I made it my business to find out," he returned with complete sang-froid. "That's why I'm going by it."

Patricia was conscious of a sudden surge of resentment against this man who, whilst always making it perfectly clear to her that he thought very little of her—not even enough to desire her friendship—yet dared to thrust himself into her concerns in a detached but unequivocal manner that she found exasperating in the extreme.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said distantly. "We are not friends—as you pointed out just now. You don't like me, and"—rather viciously—"I certainly don't like you. So that I entirely fail to see why you should trouble to find out by what boat I'm returning or why you should wish to sail by it."

"You don't like me?" he remarked meditatively, completely ignoring the rest of her speech. "No, I suppose you don't. And yet"—looking at her speculatively—"do you know, I believe I could make you like me—quite a lot—if I tried?"

"Mr. Lorimer!" She sprang to her feet indignantly. Unfortunately for the maintenance of her dignity, the train selected that particular moment for lurching violently as, for some reason best known to the engine-driver, it jerked forward a few yards. The jar of it almost threw her off her feet. She staggered wildly, then Kerry's arms closed round her and for a single, vibrantly conscious moment she lay against his breast. Recovering her balance, she drew away from him in nervous haste.

"Ramshackle things, these Indian trains," he commented nonchalantly, as he released her, still steadying her with a hand beneath her arm. "All serene, now?"

But if his voice was cool the same coolness was conspicuously absent from his eyes. Patricia, glancing up nervously,

caught their gaze bent on her. They reminded her of fire—grey fire. Her own eyes fell before the sudden flame that burned in them.

“As I was saying——” he began.

“Oh, never mind what you were saying,” she interrupted hastily. “It—it was of no importance, was it?”

“Think not?” He laughed a little. “Very well. It shall be as the *Miss-sahib* ordains. So now, with your permission, I will retire. But I’ll be around when you want anything doing.” He made as though to leave the compartment.

“Need you go?” The words had left her lips almost before she was aware she had uttered them, and she flushed quickly as she realized their significance.

His mouth twitched at the corners.

“Why, no, I needn’t, of course. But I thought—I gathered you’d prefer it.”

She lifted her head with a little proud gesture.

“It makes no difference to me. By all means stay if you wish to. It seems rather absurd to be travelling to England and——”

“Pointedly avoiding each other all the way?” he concluded swiftly. “Very well, then, let’s agree to bury the hatchet. Shall we?”

He held out his hand and half-reluctantly she laid hers within it. His fingers closed round it possessively, holding it in a strong, firm grip.

“After all, you know,” he added, with a humorous little smile, “you can always dig it up again if you want to.”

CHAPTER IX

ON THE JOURNEY HOME

DINNER was over on board the *Cassilia*, and Patricia was sitting alone in a quiet corner of the deck with only her thoughts for company. From a little distance away came the sound of voices, interspersed with an occasional gay burst of laughter, and now and again a stray bar of music or an arpeggio flicked lightly across the strings of a violin floated up the companion-way. The final dance of the voyage home had been fixed for to-night, but somehow Patricia felt curiously indifferent as to whether she took any part in it or not. If people came along and insisted upon her joining in, she supposed she should yield to their importunities, but until they discovered her—and she thought that the spot she had selected was fairly secure from observation—she intended to remain where she was.

It was curious to think that in a very short space of time the friendly, jolly crowd of people on board—and there had been a particularly nice passenger-list this voyage, she reflected—would have separated and gone their several ways, very probably, in the majority of cases, never to meet again. It is not often that the foundations of a lasting friendship are laid on board ship—although that most permanent of institutions, matrimony, is quite frequently erected on the uncertain scaffolding offered by a shipboard acquaintance.

Patricia's thoughts travelled slowly over the weeks which had elapsed since she quitted Coomara. In retrospect the time appeared much longer than it had actually been if measured by the prosaic method of so many days and hours. The day on which she had boarded the train for Bombay seemed

extraordinarily far distant. So much had happened between then and now—such an amazing adjustment taken place in her attitude towards Kerry Lorimer.

Looking back, she could hardly refrain from laughing at the remembrance of her prickly reception of him when he had first entered the train and calmly announced his intention of travelling to Bombay—and ultimately to England—in her company! She could still recall her feeling of revolt—the reasonless fear which had obsessed her, like the terror of some wild creature which finds itself suddenly trapped.

And then had come his reassuring offer to act merely as a courier and his proposed burying of the hatchet. He had very literally fulfilled the obligations he had taken upon himself. Throughout the whole of the long, wearisome journey from Coomara to Bombay he had smoothed away every difficulty and added whatever little comfort it was possible to procure—appearing, as though by magic, at the carriage door, armed with a cooling drink, just when her throat felt unendurably parched and dry with the heat and dust of travel, and, in partnership with the old butler—a former servant of her father's—who travelled with her as far as Bombay, seeing to it that the meals served to her were the best possible in the circumstances.

Since she had been on board the *Cassilia* it had been the same thing. Unobtrusively, Kerry had contrived to take the edge off all the sharp corners of the voyage for her, as only an experienced traveller knows how to do, and now that the long journey to England was approaching its end she was realizing how much of its effortless ease and smoothness she owed to his thoughtfulness.

She was also realizing something else as well—that she had come to count on his comradeship in a way which puzzled and almost frightened her. She was instinctively conscious that they each looked at life from fundamentally opposing angles, that his ways were not—could never be—hers. Yet, notwithstanding this clash of temperament and outlook, it

was with an odd sinking of the heart that she recognized how short a time still remained of companionship together.

Always, it seemed to her, he himself had assumed the impermanence of their relation—had implied more than once that theirs was only the transient comradeship of fellow-travellers thrown together by the hap of fate. Never, on any occasion, had he spoken of the possibility of their meeting again after they had once reached England. It was as though, with the docking of the *Cassilia* at Liverpool, a shutter would descend between them, setting them apart for ever.

She had just arrived at this point in her reflections when she heard a familiar footstep and Lorimer himself came sauntering towards her. How he had discovered her retreat she did not know, but his sudden appearance, exactly at the moment she was thinking about him, sufficed to send the blood rushing up into her cheeks, and she turned her face quickly aside to hide that tell-tale banner of confusion. But he did not appear to have noticed it, for he addressed her in his usual imperturbable manner, apparently merely concerned for her material comfort.

"Are you quite warm enough, sitting there, Miss-sahib? Summer doesn't necessarily synchronize with the first of May in these latitudes, you know."

"Oh, I'm quite warm, thanks," she answered hurriedly.

"Let me tuck you up a bit better."

As he spoke, he stooped and with deft fingers rearranged the rug that lay across her knees. Then he bent over her and drew the fur coat she was wearing a little closer about her shoulders. As he did so, his hand brushed the warm, bare whiteness of her throat and he drew it away hastily, as though he had been stung. Patricia quivered. The touch of his hand against her skin sent a sudden little tremor, as of racing fire, through all her body.

He moved aside and, leaning against the deck rail, stood looking down at her contemplatively.

"Why are you not dancing to-night?" he said at last.

"I might ask you the same question," she retorted.

"No, you mightn't. I've never taken any part in these skittish performances since we came on board. But you have."

"Why don't you?" she asked. The clear moonlight revealed the long, supple lines of his figure—lithe limbs which looked as though they combined the strength and pliancy of tempered steel. If only he did dance, she commented inwardly, he would probably prove to be an extremely good dancer. It struck her suddenly how well a man's evening kit became him, and recollecting, with a funny little quiver of amusement, his appearance on that memorable occasion when she had seen him for the first time, clad in a battered old suit of weather-worn khaki, she wondered fugitively whence he had contrived to evolve evening clothes of such impeccable cut.

"Why don't you dance?" she repeated.

"Why don't I?" He stared down at her sombrely. Then, all at once, a curious glint came into his eyes. "Will you risk it?" he demanded suddenly.

She caught her breath a little. Then, forcing herself to meet his glance:

"Yes. I'll risk it," she answered.

"Good." He helped her out of the deck-chair in which she was sitting, and together they made their way below to where the dancing was in full swing.

"I may dance like a jungle elephant," he warned her. "If so, remember it was you who proposed that we should gyrate together."

Patricia looked up at him with mirthful eyes. Somehow her spirits had risen unaccountably.

"On my own head be it," she said.

But she need have had no fears—afterwards she told herself that she had never really had any. Kerry danced equally as well as he rode or shot, and she abandoned herself

to the swaying rhythm of the music and to the firm, strong clasp of the arms that held her.

"I'm glad it happens to be a valse, not a fox-trot," observed Kerry. "The latter isn't dancing at all, in my humble opinion."

After that they spoke very little, but glided through the dance almost in silence, with a curious instinctive harmony of step and motion.

It was over—and as they emerged on deck once again, Patricia was conscious that her heart was beating more rapidly than usual.

"That will be something to remember," said Kerry. Adding in an odd tone: "When there's nothing else."

"We might conceivably dance together sometime or other in England," she submitted. "You never know."

"I do know. I shan't be in England, for one thing. And even if I were, I should never dance with you again."

"Why? Did I dance so badly?"—demurely.

"You know you did not."

"Then why won't you dance with me again—ever?"

"Because"—looking away from her across the wide expanse of sea—"there are some things a man may not do. And that's one of them."

She could not see his face very distinctly in the starlit dusk, but his voice held a curious note of sternness.

"Aren't we friends, then—after all?" she said. "I thought we'd agreed to bury the hatchet."

"Do you remember"—she could feel that he was looking down at her intently—"that I once told you I believed I could—make you care, if I tried? Well, I'm not going to try. That's all."

An utter silence followed. Patricia felt as though he had suddenly slammed a door in her face. A strange tumult of emotion shook her—resentment at the sheer brutality of the

harshly uttered speech, and, underlying that, a queer, inexplicable pain.

Instantly, everything that was woman in her bade her hide her hurt. She contrived a laugh—a laugh which held quite a genuine-sounding ripple of mirth.

“And, anyway, you won’t have the opportunity for trying such an experiment if you’re not going to stay in England,” she said.

He nodded.

“True. As soon as I’ve landed you safely on English shores my job’s finished—at least, for the present.”

“‘Your job’s finished’?” she queried. “What do you mean? Do you mean—that you came to England on my account?”

“Entirely—to see you safely back.”

“But—but why?” She stared at him in astonishment.

“Luttrell asked me to,” he answered simply.

“He asked you to?”

Kerry bent his head.

“Yes, that last day—when I came to see him.”

She was silent, divided between a sudden rush of overwhelming tenderness for the man whose last thoughts on earth had been concerned only for her welfare and a disagreeable feeling of enforced indebtedness towards Lorimer. All that he had done for her, then, all the care and pleasant comradeship he had bestowed upon her had been given solely at the instance of her father—not spontaneously, but merely from a sense of duty! A slow flush dyed her face and neck scarlet at the very thought, and she felt profoundly thankful for the darkness which screened her from the piercing gaze of those keen grey eyes of his. When at last she spoke there was a quiver of hurt pride in her voice.

“I am very sorry my father troubled you in the matter,” she said. “He was so—so fond of me, you see”—she blinked away the tears that rose to her eyes at the remembrance of

her beloved Sahib—"that he wouldn't think of the trouble it might be giving you. And there was no need for it. I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself."

"It was no trouble," returned Lorimer. He moved restlessly, as though he were under some strain that fretted him.

"I'm afraid it must have been, if you didn't want to come to England—if you wouldn't have been coming otherwise."

"What I may happen to want has very little to do with the matter. Ishmael wasn't asked what particular place of residence he favoured."

"Ishmael?" There was so much concentrated bitterness in his tones that her heart was touched. "But you are not Ishmael!"

"Am I not? Still, you needn't waste your sympathies on me. Even Ishmael got acclimatized to his desert in time, I expect. I'm so acclimatized to mine that I've no use for any other kind of life, now—as you know."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so hardly," she protested unhappily.

"Forgive me," he returned with sudden penitence. "I'd no right to inflict my railings at fate on you."

"I've nothing to forgive," she answered gently. "I've only—to thank you for taking care of me. I wish I could tell Sahib—how good you've been. He would have thanked you better than I can."

Instinctively she stretched out her hand towards him. With a stifled exclamation he caught it in his and bent his head above it.

"Don't thank me," he said unsteadily. "The last few weeks have been the only ones worth living in a matter of ten years. It's I who should thank—you."

She felt his lips pressed suddenly, passionately, against her hand. Then, with a strange, lingering gentleness, he released it and strode away, leaving her alone in the darkness, with only the ceaseless wash of the sea sounding in her ears like some farewell dirge.

CHAPTER X

STRANGWAYS

“MISS LUTTRELL?”

As Patricia descended from the train at the little station of Ravenhurst, a footman in quiet livery approached and accosted her respectfully. She regarded him with unfeigned approval. After being attended for so many years by native servants, it gave her a curious feeling of satisfaction, of realization that this was actually England and Home, to note the imperturbable, clean-shaven face with its inexpressive eyes—eyes that yet observed alertly the smallest detail which it was their duty to observe—and the tall, immaculate figure that somehow managed to convey by its very poise a suggestion of appropriate deference—typically the face and figure of a good-class English servant.

“Yes, I am Miss Luttrell,” she replied.

The man touched his hat.

“His lordship’s car is here to meet you, miss,” he said. He proceeded to relieve her of her hand-baggage and led the way out of the station to where, like a swan among ducks, a dignified limousine waited at the kerb, surrounded by the usual promiscuous assortment of governess-carts, farmers’ traps, and local ’buses which may generally be seen gathered to meet the train at any country station.

She stepped into the car, the tall footman tucked the rug round her knees, briefly informed her that her trunks would follow in the Strangways luggage car, and a moment later the limousine was purring smoothly along the road which wound its way betwixt woodland and undulating pasture-fields.

Patricia leaned forward and gazed out of the window,

feasting her eyes now upon the sloping meadows, now upon the woods which marshalled their branching trees right up to the very edge of the road itself. Oh, the green—the glorious, translucent, tender green of it all! To eyes that had looked so long on the parched lands of the East, there was something almost miraculous in each quivering blade of young, shooting grass, in the shimmer of pale green leaf which was just beginning to clothe the trees.

If only the Sahib had been there to see it with her—to drink in the freshness of this English spring! He would have loved it so, and her eyes smarted with unbidden tears at the thought that he and she would never again rejoice together in the exquisite birth of the year.

Presently the road swung out towards the coast, and below where pine and fir grew almost to the lip of the sheer white cliffs she caught glimpses of the blue, sun-flecked waters of the English Channel. For a mile or two the road followed the coast-line, then the car turned inland and the way grew sombre with scattered pine-woods—outposts of the great Forest which lay beyond. A few minutes later the car checked outside a fine old gateway and, in response to an imperative hoot of the horn, massive iron gates rolled slowly backwards, revealing the curving avenue of trees which led to Strangways Castle.

Patricia caught her breath with a strange little qualm of fear. She had reached her journey's end, and all at once she was acutely conscious of the fact that the people amongst whom she was henceforth going to live were total strangers. They might not like her—their ways would not be her ways. She felt as a stranger in a strange land, and an aching homesickness rushed over her for the India she knew so well, for her adored Sahib, for the familiar friendly faces that had been wont to greet her at Coomara.

Stiff with shyness, she descended from the car when at last it drew to a standstill, and, inwardly quaking, mounted the short flight of shallow granite steps which confronted

her. Above, the great front door of ancient oak, studded with giant nails, stood wide open, and she was vaguely conscious of two or three figures grouped around the threshold.

Then some one darted forward with a whispering swish of skirts, a pair of soft arms encircled her, while a pair of softer lips pressed themselves warmly against her cheeks.

"Welcome to Strangeways. Welcome home, my dear—for this is your home, now."

She found herself looking down into two of the softest, sweetest lavender-blue eyes—eyes which, although they held a gentle sadness in their misty depths, were yet brimming over with loving-kindness—and in a moment all her shyness vanished. No one could possibly feel shy with Lady Mary Wynsborough. She was so small, so fragile, like an old-world picture with her powder-grey hair and faded rose-leaf skin, and the friendliness of her seemed to radiate out towards you like the fragrance of a flower. As Patricia's strong young arms closed round her, and she returned her welcoming kiss, she felt that it was very possible indeed that Strangeways might yet come to mean "home" to her.

"You must be very tired," pursued Lady Mary. "Come in, my dear, and we'll have tea at once."

As she followed her hostess into the house, her eyes absorbed in a swift, sweeping glance the great panelled hall, with its huge open fire-place, and the mighty oaken beams which raftered the ceiling. Flowers, flowers everywhere, lightened its somewhat gloomy vastness—tall narcissi gleaming goldenly against the warm brown of the panelling, while bowls of tulips here and there burned like clusters of red and yellow candles. From dusky, unsuspected corners came the fragrance of freshly gathered violets. Spring flowers, English spring flowers—at the sight and scent of them Patricia experienced anew the thrill of the returned exile.

Then she became aware that two figures, waiting in the background whilst Lady Mary greeted her, had come forward—one, a big, gay person with fair, close-cropped, crinkly

hair and blue eyes that looked out on the world with lazy good-humour, the other, a little, shrivelled old man with stooping shoulders, and a thin, lined face which might have been cut out of old ivory.

"This is my nephew, Kit," said Lady Mary, laying her hand on the arm of the former. "And this"—drawing the old man forward—"is Jonathan—Mr. Mathers, my brother's secretary and librarian. And one of our oldest and most valued friends," she added kindly.

A dull flush crept up under the old man's withered skin. His dreamy eyes, behind their horn-rimmed spectacles, rested for a moment adoringly on Lady Mary's face.

"Her ladyship is too kind," he muttered as he shook hands. "Always too kind." He moved away, fading out of the picture on silent, slippered feet in the direction of the library and leaving Patricia alone with Lady Mary and her nephew.

The latter was Lord Marchdale's heir and, from the time of his parents' death, during his early childhood, he had made his home, at the Earl's express desire, at Strangways. Not that his uncle had any particular affection for that branch of the family. On the contrary, he had quarrelled violently with his only brother, Kit Wynsborough's father, disliking him intensely, but after the latter's death he had remarked forcefully: "As the boy's got to inherit, damn it, whether I will or no, let him come here and learn how to do the job decently." So Kit had come, and to Lady Mary, who had passed through many troubled vicissitudes in the difficult process of adapting her life to that of her autocratic brother, his cheery presence at the castle had been like a ray of sunlight in the darkness. It was fifteen years ago since, a freckle-faced urchin of ten, he had arrived at Strangways on foot, having missed his train and mislaid his luggage *en route*, and the same merry imperturbability with which he had faced these blows of outrageous fortune had carried him triumphantly through the various storms and tempests which

inevitably formed a goodly part of the existence of anyone connected with his irascible lordship, the Earl of Marchdale.

Looking across at him while Lady Mary busied herself pouring out tea, Patricia felt whole-heartedly glad of his presence. The companionship of some one of her own generation—some one to laugh and be young with—would make a considerable difference to life at Strangeways. It would be rather like having a big brother, she reflected.

"Well?" There was an interrogative inflection of amusement in Kit's voice as he spoke. "Do you think you are going to like us?"

Patricia started and blushed.

"Was I staring?" she said. "I'm so sorry."

"How can she tell if she's going to like us yet, Kit?" protested Lady Mary. "People can't decide things like that all in a moment."

"Oh, yes, they can," he replied irrepressibly. "I've quite decided that—Patricia"—he hesitated laughingly over her Christian name, then plunged—"and I are going to be the most excellent pals."

Patricia smiled across at him.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if we were," she acknowledged.

"My revered uncle will find two of us much more difficult to cope with than one, Aunt Mary mine," pursued Kit with unabated cheerfulness. "We shall present a strong and united front when, like the heathen, he rages furiously together."

"Oh, Kit, how can you?" Lady Mary glanced round nervously as though she half expected her brother to materialize suddenly out of space and forthwith proceed to empty the vials of his wrath upon his nephew's devoted head. "You mustn't take any notice of him, Patricia. He always talks a lot of nonsense. My brother never quite understands it."

"No, he doesn't," agreed Kit with assumed gravity. "A

fact which will be quite comprehensible to you when you've met him."

"I suppose he is out?" suggested Patricia. She had been inwardly a trifle puzzled at her godfather's absence.

"No—no." Again the little trace of nervousness evinced itself in Lady Mary's voice. "He is in his own special sanctum. He wants you to go to him there when you have had tea."

"You're to have a private audience," supplemented Kit, his eyes twinkling. "So you'd better be making mental preparation to be admitted to the Presence."

Patricia looked slightly alarmed.

"It sounds somewhat awe-inspiring," she said.

"Not at all, my dear," Lady Mary assured her hastily. "Don't think that." The pink in her cheeks deepened a little and her eyes grew wistful as she recalled the Earl's instructions. "Send her in to me—alone, when she comes. Do you understand, Mary?" he had said. And Lady Mary had understood exactly as well as though he had told her in so many words—understood that his love for Barbara was still pulling at his heartstrings, and that the old man's savage pride forbade any witness of the first meeting betwixt him and the child of the woman he had worshipped, lest he should betray himself.

"You see," she explained haltingly to Patricia, "your mother was an old and dear friend of my brother's, and perhaps he thought that—seeing you—might bring back the memory of former times."

Patricia, who had learned from her father the story of that long-ago romance, divined as clearly as Lady Mary herself the reason that lay behind the Earl's expressed desire that she should go to him alone. A feeling of intense pity for him rushed over her. He must have cared very deeply for her mother if, even at this late date, he dreaded the first meeting with her daughter. So that it was with a little warm glow of sympathy at her heart that she at length ac-

accompanied Lady Mary to the door of his room, and, having been bidden to come in, entered it alone.

It was a large room, the walls lined with crowded bookshelves. But for the fact that Strangways boasted a really famous collection of valuable books, housed in another part of the castle, of which Jonathan Mathers was librarian, it would probably have been designated the library. As it was, it went by the name of the South Room, and was sacred to the sole use of the old Earl himself. A bright fire crackled on the hearth, for the wind was in the east, notwithstanding that it was the month of May, and Lord Marchdale's gouty foot always apprised him immediately when it blew from that quarter. Thence the knowledge usually percolated through the entire household before the day was a few hours old, and it was more by good luck than anything else if ever morning wore to evening without his lordship's having reduced Lady Mary to tears, threatened to disinherit Kit of everything save only what the entail might provide, and sacked one or more of the extremely efficient servants on the grounds of gross incapacity.

As Patricia entered the room, Marchdale, who had been sitting by the fire with his gouty foot resting on a stool, rose slowly and with the aid of an amber-headed stick to his feet. What Patricia saw was a tall old man, with white hair and moustache, and a truculent eagle hook of a nose that spoke to the Norman ancestry from which the Wynsborough family traced their descent. Shaggy penthouse brows frowned above eyes that were grey like steel, eyes that gave Patricia a sudden shock, they were so extraordinarily like other eyes she knew—like Kerry's. In one of them was stuck a monocle, where it reposed with the facility of long habit.

What Christopher Blair Wynsborough, Earl of Marchdale, saw was a slim young woman with smooth dark hair winging back from a white brow, vividly blue eyes set between two black streaks of lash, and a scarlet mouth curling up at the corners in a smile half shy, half friendly, and

wholly charming which seemed to strike away the years at a single blow and carry him back to the days when Barbara herself had stood and smiled at him just so.

For a long, long moment Marchdale stared at his god-daughter, and his thin, aristocratic old face seemed to grow a little greyer as he stared. At last he spoke.

"So!" he said slowly, and his voice held an odd note of resentment. "So you're Stewart Luttrell's daughter!"

Her lips quivered sensitively at his abrupt mention of her father's name. Perhaps the sharp old eyes that were observing her detected it, for he held out his hand and went on speaking quickly:

"I'm glad you made up your mind to give us a trial here. I was afraid you might funk it."

"Why should I?"

He smiled grimly.

"It all depends on what you've heard about us. I haven't the most savoury reputation for sweet temper, I believe."

She smiled back at him.

"I don't think I'm at all afraid."

He regarded her thoughtfully.

"No," he said. "You don't look as if you'd be afraid of much. I knew your mother once—did you know that?"—sharply.

"Yes," she answered simply. "I knew."

"Humph!" He stared down at her as though wondering how much she knew. "Well"—curtly—"you're like her, but not a tenth part so good-looking. Your mother was a beautiful woman. You'll never hold a candle to her."

Patricia nodded her head composedly.

"No, I know I shan't," she replied. "But I can't help it, can I? Not being so good-looking, I mean. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me just as I am."

Marchdale looked startled. He was not accustomed to such complete sang-froid and for a moment it took his breath away. People, as a rule, became flustered and a trifle inco-

herent when he flung one of his frequent uncomplimentary speeches at them, and it amused him to see them floundering. But this surprising god-daughter of his remained perfectly cool and unruffled. He found himself liking her all the better for it. He gave vent to an unwilling chuckle.

"Oh, you'll do!" he said. "I expect I shall be able to put up with you all right—if you're able to put up with me?" There was a note of interrogation in his voice—something that to Patricia's ears sounded a thought anxious. It was as though this tall, arrogant old man were covertly asking her to be friends with him.

A glint of mirth showed in her eyes.

"I'll try," she said demurely.

He nodded, a responsive twinkle gleaming for an instant in his own eyes, and turned away, and Patricia, feeling herself dismissed, made the best of her way back to the great hall. Kit had taken himself off, but Lady Mary rose fluttering from her seat and came to meet her.

"Well?" she queried a little anxiously. "Did you—did my brother——"

"We're going to be great friends," Patricia assured her. "We've made a compact to put up with each other. I think I've got quite a gem of a godfather."

Lady Mary looked a trifle taken aback. Her brother, to the best of her recollection, was not in the habit of making compacts. Usually he laid down the law with considerable emphasis and everybody fell over themselves and each other in their haste to obey it—or, if they didn't, there were ructions. However, apparently his god-daughter's arrival had coincided with one of his rare moods of amiability, and with a small inward sigh of relief that matters had gone so smoothly, she suggested that Patricia might like to see the rooms allotted her.

"They're in the West Wing—I hope you'll like them," she added.

"I'm sure I shall," Patricia promised her. Nor had she

any need to rescind that promise when, after traversing innumerable stairs and corridors, they came at last to the little suite of rooms—bedroom, bathroom, and sitting-room adjoining, which had been apportioned her. Ancient though the castle might be, it had been sufficiently modernized inside to meet the requirements of present-day luxury, thus “making the best of both worlds,” as Kit expressed it.

With a little nod and smile Lady Mary left her to settle in, and with the assistance of a maid, who was already busy unpacking the numerous trunks and suit-cases she had brought with her, the process was accomplished without any undue loss of time.

Dinner was rather a stately function, and Patricia was speedily made aware that the entire household lived more or less in a state of enforced tension when, as at present, her godfather was suffering from an attack of gout. The men-servants waited upon him with an anxious assiduity that, even so, failed to save them from curt reprimand, and when the third footman was unlucky enough to drop a spoon—which clattered on the polished floor like the sound of the last trump, as Kit afterwards observed—the explosion of wrath which ensued would have fitted a far more heinous offence.

Lady Mary dutifully tried to make conversation, but her timid efforts were promptly nipped in the bud by a succinct: “If you can’t talk sense, Mary, better not talk at all,” and by the time that dessert was reached a gloomy silence had settled down upon the quartette, alleviated only, as far as Patricia was concerned, by an occasional twinkling glance of amusement flung at her across the table by the irrepressible Kit.

Matters cheered up a little after dinner. Marchdale stalked off to his own room and shut himself up there for the remainder of the evening, while Lady Mary, Kit, and Patricia chatted together in the hall round a big fire which had been lighted to keep out the chill of the evening. Jonathan Mathers, it seemed, never took his meals with the

family. He had his own private apartments in the castle, and, unless his presence were commanded by the Earl for the discussion of some matter of business, he rarely emerged from the seclusion of his beloved library.

"Jonathan came to Strangways when I was a tiny child," Lady Mary explained. "I remember his coming quite well, because it happened on my tenth birthday. He was a queer, shy young man of twenty-four and wore spectacles. Now he's sixty-eight."

"And still wears spectacles," supplemented Kit.

She smiled.

"Yes, and still wears them. I couldn't imagine Jonathan without his spectacles."

"Any more than you could imagine Uncle Blair without his gout."

"He hasn't always got gout," said Lady Mary protestingly.

"Thank heavens, no!" responded Kit devoutly. "If he had, we should all have perished from nervous exhaustion years ago. As it is"—turning to Patricia—"he periodically decimates the domestic staff. We've had two housemaids, and one under-footman give notice because, they said, 'his lordship's tantrums gave them the heart-spasms.' I hope you've got a pretty good nerve?"

"I think it will stand the strain," she answered with mock gravity. "But go on telling me about old Jonathan Mathers, Lady Mary," she continued. "Has he always been librarian here?"

"Oh, no, only during the last few years, since he grew too old for more exacting work. He first came here as secretary to my father, then later on he did major-domo's work—accounts and things like that, in addition. In fact, he's always been a sort of right-hand man, first to my father and afterwards to Blair. He is absolutely devoted to the whole family."

"He even has a sneaking affection for me," volunteered Kit.

Patricia nodded.

"Naturally," she said gaily. "Being the heir, you're a most important part of the family."

"Oh, I'm a mistake—a misfit. I ought never to have been the heir," replied Kit. "Nobody loves me."

An unwonted note of bitterness underlay the jesting words, and Patricia looked across at him in surprise. A quick, warning glance from Lady Mary, however, checked the question that hovered on her lips, and she followed her hostess's lead as the latter quietly turned the subject and began speaking of something else. But the easy intimacy of a few moments before seemed to have vanished; the conversation halted between long silences. Kit had become suddenly moody, and presently, making the merest pretence at an excuse, he got up restlessly and quitted the hall.

Patricia's eyes met Lady Mary's interrogatively.

"Did I say anything I shouldn't have done?" she queried doubtfully.

"No, oh, no, my dear. It wasn't your fault," Lady Mary assured her. "It was just that you touched on what is an old sore with Kit—that his uncle rather resents his being the heir. Kit makes the best of it, as a rule, but every now and then he gets a little bitter and irritable over it."

"But—but why on earth should my godfather resent his being the heir?" exclaimed Patricia in astonishment. "Surely—his own brother's son—who could have a better claim?"

Lady Mary hesitated a moment. Her cheeks grew very pink and her pretty, lavender-blue eyes became sorrowful and troubled.

"It's an old story," she said at last, a trifle nervously. "I wonder—I think perhaps it would be better if you knew—if I told you——"

"Don't tell me anything you don't wish me to know—please," begged Patricia quickly. "I haven't in the least an inquisitive disposition. It was only that—well, quite

suddenly we all seemed to be at cross-purposes"—smiling ruefully.

"I know—I know," Lady Mary nodded. "And it will be like that, sometimes. I think it would be better if I told you, after all. It means going back—going back a good many years." She paused, seeming to seek for words. Then at last she began to speak, in a low, nervous voice as though she were afraid of being overheard. "It's true no one has a better right to inherit than Kit. He's the only child of our only brother. But there were four of us altogether—there was another sister, Lynette. She came next in age to Blair, and he simply worshipped her. I don't think"—rather pathetically—"that ever brother and sister were so devoted to each other as Blair and Lynette. She married, and within the first year of her marriage her husband was killed—fighting in India. The news came just when the birth of her first child was expected and the shock was too great for her. The child, a boy, was born the same night, and Lynette died without seeing him."

A little ejaculation of pitiful dismay escaped Patricia.

"Oh, how sad! How sad!"

"Yes. It was terribly sad. Blair was nearly out of his mind. We did not know what to do with him. And then an idea occurred to me. I took Lynette's baby—it was such a dear baby—and I laid it in his arms." Lady Mary paused a moment. Her eyes were misty. "I think that saved Blair's reason. From that day onwards he thought of nothing and nobody except the baby. By will he had been appointed guardian—Lynette's husband had arranged it all as soon as he knew that a child was coming, in case anything should happen to him out in India. But even if he hadn't been actually appointed guardian, Blair would never have consented to be separated from the child. He had him brought to Strangways, and his one regret was that Lynette's son could not inherit. He has always grudged Kit's inheriting. Both the boys were brought up here, you know. But

there was never any question as to which of the two was Blair's favourite"—smiling a little wistfully.

"And where is he now?" asked Patricia with interest. "I mean Lynette's son?"

The light died suddenly out of Lady Mary's face.

"Oh, my dear, it was a tragedy—it has been the tragedy of our lives. We both loved him so. He did something"—her voice dropped—"something very disgraceful. My brother couldn't forgive, and there was a terrible quarrel between them and Kerry went away. That was ten years ago, and we have never seen him since."

"Kerry?" exclaimed Patricia involuntarily. "I knew a man named Kerry out in India—Kerry Lorimer."

Lady Mary uttered a little strangled cry and all the colour drained itself away from her face.

"Kerry Lorimer?" she repeated in sudden frightened tones. "Why, that—that was Lynette's son!"

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET OF THE CASTLE

FOR a moment Lady Mary and Patricia gazed at each other in mutual astonishment. Then the former gasped out incredulously:

"You know him? You know—Kerry?"

Patricia nodded.

"Yes, I know him quite well. He used to do a lot of work for my father out in India."

Lady Mary clasped her hands tightly together, vainly endeavouring to control the obvious agitation under which she was labouring.

"When did you last see him? Is it long since you saw him?"

"I said good-bye to him in town only this morning. We travelled home from India together, you know. My father had asked him to see me safely back, and he came as far as London with me."

"You've been with him as recently as that?"—impulsively. "How was he looking? Was he well? Did he look—much older?"

The questions came tumbling out with breathless eagerness. It was easy to see that Lady Mary had been devoted to her nephew. There was something infinitely pathetic in that eagerness—it held all the hunger of the long, starved years through which she had ached for news of him, and the desperate yearning in her voice touched Patricia to the quick.

"He was looking splendidly well," she answered hastily. "But surely," she added, "now that he is home from India, you'll see him yourself?"

Lady Mary's slight figure stiffened.

"Oh, no, I couldn't see him," she said with a sudden accession of hauteur that sat oddly upon her. She was not cast in a severe mould. "Blair would never allow him to come to Strangways again. You forget—he did something very disgraceful. He dishonoured us."

Patricia's loyalty rose in instant protest.

"I don't believe it," she said bluntly. She hardly knew what prompted the spontaneous denial. It had been utterly instinctive—based on some subconscious certainty that dishonour could have no part in Kerry Lorimer.

And then into her mind darted the recollection of something which he had said to her father when the latter lay dying—of a sentence she had chanced to overhear as she passed along the veranda: "*You've known the whole truth about me and believed in me in spite of it.*" It had struck her curiously at the time, but all that had followed—her father's death and her own ensuing illness—had combined to wipe the recollection of it out of her mind until this moment.

Now it returned, jarring her with its disagreeable significance—with the way in which it seemed to meet and dovetail into Lady Mary's statement. But since the time when Kerry had given those words utterance, there had intervened the long journey from Coomara to England, and this, although it had left her still puzzled and bewildered by the odd clashes and contradictions of the man's nature, had yet considerably influenced her attitude towards him. For the vague hostility which he had originally inspired in her had been substituted a precarious friendship, cloaking the first stirrings of a new, less easily defined emotion of which, as yet, she was hardly consciously aware. And from this was born a sudden uprush of spontaneous woman's loyalty which fought against belief in his dishonour. Whatever he might have done in the past, reckless or indiscreet, she would stake her life that he had kept his honour clean.

"I don't believe it," she repeated doggedly.

Lady Mary's eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"Oh, my dear, I wish you need not! Often and often I've told myself that it was impossible—that I couldn't believe it. But it's true"—hopelessly—"quite true. It's that which hurts so. That Kerry—*Kerry* should be guilty——" She broke off, her voice failing her piteously.

"Of what was he supposed to have been guilty?" asked Patricia gently. She could not be otherwise than gentle with this little, sad, desperately unhappy lady, although inwardly she was longing to pour angry contempt upon the charges of disgrace and dishonour which she had been making against Kerry.

"That I cannot tell you," replied Lady Mary with a sudden strength of decision unexpected in one so frail and sensitive.

"Thank God, only Blair and I and Jonathan ever knew the truth. We were spared the whole world's knowing of our disgrace."

"And you believe—really believe that Kerry has done something disgraceful?" cried Patricia incredulously. "Oh, how can you?"

"I wish—I wish I could *dis*believe! Do you know, sometimes I've wondered—if, by any chance—whether we could possibly have misjudged him? . . . But no"—shaking her head—"he couldn't deny it." She looked up at Patricia with quiet hopelessness. "You see, there was no vestige of real doubt. . . . Oh, it was a bitter blow to us. That Kerry should have failed so miserably!" She paused, then added very simply and sadly: "He was like a son to me."

The touching little avowal quenched all Patricia's anger. She could feel nothing but sympathy, nothing but the tenderest pity for the woman beside her. It was self-evident that she had simply worshipped Kerry—still worshipped him, strive though she might to put him out of her heart—and that her belief in his guilt had shadowed her whole life. Patricia drew her into her arms, comforting her as she might have comforted a child.

"Some day," she said,—“some day you'll find out that

it's been all a mistake, and that Kerry has never been guilty of anything you could be ashamed of. Then he'll come back and you'll all be happy together at Strangways again."

But Lady Mary shook her head.

"That will never be," she said with sad conviction. "I used to think so sometimes, myself, years ago—it seemed so *impossible* that Kerry could have done what he did. . . . But there was no mistake." She lifted her face and kissed Patricia gently. "But I'm so glad and grateful that you, who have met him, cannot believe anything bad about him. That means he must be different now—that he is no longer wild and reckless and careless of others. It does mean that?" She paused interrogatively, as though longing for an affirmative reply.

Patricia met her beseeching glance with steady blue eyes.

"I know that my father had complete confidence in him," she said quietly. "I think you would feel the same, if you knew him now—you and godfather."

A sudden look of alarm overspread Lady Mary's face.

"You mustn't let my brother know that you've met Kerry," she said hastily. "It would upset him terribly. He won't even allow his name to be mentioned."

She was so distressed at the bare idea that Patricia had some difficulty in soothing her, and when at last she was reassured she was full of wistful apology for having, as she considered, selfishly outraged all the dictates of hospitality.

"What must you think of me, my dear, saddling you with my troubles the very first evening you are in the house?" She glanced anxiously towards the tall grandfather's clock ticking solemnly away in a corner of the hall. "Why, it's nearly half-past eleven! And you must be dreadfully tired after your journey. I'm going to carry you straight off to bed."

"I'm not in the least tired," Patricia assured her, laughing. "It isn't a very long journey from London to Ravenhurst, you know." But, nevertheless, she allowed her to

accompany her to her room and fuss over her to her heart's content, realizing that it would make the kind little lady happier and ease her sensitive conscience to let her have her own way in the matter. And when at last Lady Mary bade her good night, she folded her arms round her and said cheerily:

"You're going to saddle me with *all* your troubles in future, aren't you? I'm so big and strong compared with you that I shall be able to help with them quite a lot."

Lady Mary kissed her warmly.

"Oh, my dear!" she said, her voice quivering. "You are good—you are good! . . . But, you know, I'm not used to being coddled like that," she went on smilingly, after a pause. "I'm quite able to bear things as a rule. It was only that—it was so unexpected—finding that you knew Kerry."

She had drawn her slender little person to its full height, and as the light fell on her *poudré* hair and charming young-old face, and on the pretty shoulders emerging from the soft powder-blue of her gown, she reminded Patricia of nothing so much as of some dainty Old Dresden figure.

"You're just like a dear little Dresden China lady," she said affectionately. "You ought to be taken heaps of care of. And in future Kit and I are going to do it."

But, after Lady Mary, smiling and dimpling and with a new light of happiness in her eyes, had gone to bed, Patricia herself lay wakeful far into the night, pondering on the story which she had just heard from her—on the tragic secret which the grim old castle had hidden close within its walls for ten long years.

Somehow, in spite of all she had heard, she could not bring herself to believe that Kerry had been guilty of anything that would be counted disgraceful in the eyes of the world. It was quite likely, she thought, that he had committed some foolish, headlong action which had enraged the despotic old autocrat of Strangways, who had thereupon chosen to characterize his conduct as disgraceful, quarrelled with him vio-

lently, and finally driven him out of the house. Very possibly Marchdale had demanded an apology—the kind of apology that is offered upon all fours—and Patricia could well imagine Kerry's haughty refusal to comply with any such demand!

In any case, it had all happened ten years ago. Why, he could only have been a boy of twenty, then! It was wicked—wicked and unjust—to darken a man's whole life for some rash, boyish folly committed out of the mere thoughtlessness and ebullience of youth.

That it *had* spoilt Lorimer's life, to a very large extent, she was beginning to realize. This, this unhappy history of the past, so haltingly laid bare by Lady Mary, accounted for all that she had found so difficult to understand—for Kerry's adamant reserve about himself and his affairs, for his almost brutal cynicism at times, for the lonely existence he elected to lead, set apart from his fellows, daring any risk, caring only for the wilderness and the work with which he filled his life. And his absolute devotion to her father had evidently been grounded on the latter's belief in him. The Commissioner had known all that there was to know—Lorimer himself must have told him—and had still trusted him.

She could not but feel shaken by the story which she had just heard. Lady Mary must, of course, know all the facts of what had happened in the past, and her dreary conviction of Kerry's guilt was overwhelming. Patricia felt that if only she would have confided to her all that had occurred, she could have formed her own judgment on the matter. As it was, she was struggling in the dark against she knew not what—blindly trying to hold on to her faith in Kerry's integrity.

Somehow it comforted her tremendously to remember that her father had trusted him so implicitly. If her beloved Sahib, knowing all the story, believed in him, it went a long way towards justifying her own belief. And even supposing

he had been guilty of the worst that Lady Mary had implied, still, one failure should not be allowed to damn a man for ever. Surely, no matter of what he had been guilty, ten years of exile, of aloofness from the world, with only hard work to compensate for all that he had deliberately renounced, was sufficient expiation for any sin?

She could understand better now, those abrupt withdrawals and reticences of his. How many times, just when they had seemed to be drawing nearer to each other, approaching mutual understanding, had he not become suddenly coolly indifferent and aloof, leaving her feeling hurt and snubbed and as though she were of no account? It was all becoming intelligible in the light of Lady Mary's revelation—intelligible and forgivable. The bitterness of Ishmael had eaten into his soul—the bitterness of the exiled wanderer who has found the joy of life turn to dust and ashes—and sometimes it welled over.

CHAPTER XII

SIDELIGHTS

PATRICIA stood at the open window of her bedroom, taking a final survey before descending to breakfast. Below her stretched acre upon acre of well-kept parkland, with a ribbon of road coming into view and disappearing again coquettishly as it wound its way between the grassy slopes to where, in the distance, a grey spiral of smoke drifted upwards from the lodge which guarded the northern entrance to the park. Beyond, to the right and separated from the Strangways estate only by the width of the highway, lay the Forest, a dark blur of trees, still dim and sombre with the morning's mist which hung above them, extending almost as far as eye could reach, while on the left the silver thread of the river Stran skirted the park.

It was all very beautiful, with a beauty that was essentially English—a landscape of tender greens and browns and greys which merged imperceptibly into one another, of copse and meadowland, dotted with homely cottages. To Patricia, her eyes accustomed to the brilliant, arid beauty of the East, with its riot of rich colour and blazing clarity of light, the scene was infinitely restful, and she turned aside from it with a little sigh of regret as the deep-toned booming of a gong resounded through the corridors and passages, heralding the fact that breakfast was ready.

Fortunately for the preservation of the family digestion, Lord Marchdale invariably breakfasted alone upstairs. "I don't require society at breakfast," he was wont to remark testily. "I want my morning paper and a plate of decently grilled kidneys and bacon." So that Patricia found only Lady Mary and Kit waiting to greet her when finally she

made her way downstairs to the sunny morning-room where breakfast was usually served.

"Did you sleep well?" demanded Kit, as he pulled a chair out for her. "Or were you troubled by any of the family ghosts?"

Patricia smiled faintly. She rather thought she *had* been troubled by one of them—one that a little kindness and understanding and forgiveness might have laid ten years ago.

"I didn't know Strangways was supposed to be haunted," she replied lightly. "Is it?"

"Oh, no more than any other place of the same age," returned Kit. "I believe there's supposed to be a chap who loafs round in chains in the Tower Room and clanks them at odd moments for the benefit of unsuspecting visitors, but as you sleep at the other end of the house, I don't imagine he'll trouble you much. What will you have by way of nourishment? 'Decently grilled kidneys and bacon' à la Marchdale? Or 'am?"

"The former, please," answered Patricia. "I'm so glad you've got a *bona-fide* ghost. It would hardly seem respectable not to have one at a place like Strangways."

"A sort of flying in the face of established custom?" suggested Kit, as he came round to her side with a plate of kidneys and bacon, grilled to a nicety which must surely have found favour even in the old Earl's eyes.

Patricia nodded.

"Or it might be considered as setting up a dangerous precedent," she returned, smiling. "What would the 'stately homes of England' be without their ancestral ghosts, or the beds Queen Elizabeth slept in? You might as well live in the suburbs."

The two chatted away gaily throughout breakfast, while Lady Mary sat at the head of the table and beamed on them both. It was a new joy to her gentle heart to hear a couple of young people blithely talking nonsense together. When the meal was over she disappeared to confab with Mrs.

Merrifield, the housekeeper, while Kit volunteered to show Patricia the castle. It was a wonderful old place—the oldest part, which included the ghost-haunted tower, dating from Norman times. Since then, successive lords of Strangways had added to, and pulled down, and rebuilt, according as the spirit moved them, so that on to the original grim Norman fortress, mercifully left intact, had been grafted a habitation of oddly blended periods, often bearing here and there a quaintly individual touch characteristic of one or other of its former warlike, or romantic, or scholarly owners.

“You must be very proud to feel that all this is yours—or will be yours, some day,” said Patricia, thoughtfully.

They had wandered from room to room, Kit exhibiting the special treasures of each, and now they were passing through the hall on their way to the picture-gallery which lay beyond it in the northern wing of the castle. Suits of old armour glistened intermittently from odd corners as a shaft of sunlight flickered across steel plate or buckle, while from the gallery above trailed down the faded, tattered folds of ancient banners, stained with the blood of long-dead Wyncsboroughs. The visible linking back to bygone times appealed to Patricia just as the ancient temples and observances of India, handed down from remote ages, had appealed. It suggested something carefully guarded and preserved, sanctified by usage and custom.

“Proud? Oh, I don’t know,” answered Kit, with all an Englishman’s reticent shying off from the discussion of anything that touched him very deeply or closely. “I’m fond of the old place, of course. But for sheer, over-flowing pride in Strangways and everything belonging to it, there’s your man!” And he nodded towards Jonathan Mathers, who was at that moment approaching with a large folio clutched tightly under his arm.

The librarian hesitated upon catching sight of them, as though uncertain whether to beat a retreat or not, and a

pleased smile overspread his rather wistful old face as Patricia stopped and held out her hand.

"You are going up to the picture-gallery?" he inquired a trifle timidly.

She nodded.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to seeing the portraits," she replied eagerly. "There are some very good Old Masters amongst them, aren't there?"

Jonathan yielded a rather superficial acquiescence.

"Yes, yes. There are some beautiful paintings there," he allowed, but there was a grudging note in his voice.

Kit burst out laughing.

"Only they're not to be compared with the treasures in the library, are they, Jonathan?" he said chaffingly. "That's what he means, you know," he added, turning to Patricia.

A sudden radiance illumined the old man's face. His eyes glowed with enthusiasm.

"Yes, that's what I mean, Mr. Christopher." Even his voice appeared to ring with an unaccustomed vitality. "There are many pictures by Reynolds and Gainsborough. But"—he drew a little nearer and tapped Kit's arm with a delicate forefinger to emphasize his words—"there's only one complete manuscript in the world illuminated by the old monk, Fra Angelo. And that manuscript's in the Strangways library." He had drawn himself erect while he was speaking, but as he finished his shoulders drooped and he shrank back nervously, as though rather overwhelmed by his own temerity.

"I beg your pardon," he mumbled. "I beg your pardon. I get carried away."

Patricia smiled kindly at him.

"I don't wonder," she said, "if you have such treasures as that in the library. You must show them to me one day, Mr. Mathers. Will you?"

A dull red flushed the old librarian's thin cheeks.

"It would be a great pleasure," he said. "A great honour. Her ladyship comes sometimes—but not lately, not lately."

"I expect Aunt Mary knows them all inside out by this time," suggested Kit unfeelingly.

Old Jonathan nodded. The fire had died out of his eyes.

"Perhaps so," he assented rather wearily. "Perhaps that's it."

"But they'll be quite new to me," Patricia assured him warmly. "You'll have to explain to me all about them."

"I shall like to show them to you," he answered simply, and there was a flash of gratitude in his eyes as he continued on his way back to the library.

"His heart seems quite bound up in his books, doesn't it?" observed Patricia, smiling.

"It's bound up in Strangways altogether," answered Kit. "I think if he ever had to leave here, he'd die."

"But he never will?" she questioned quickly. "God-father would never turn him away after all these years?"

"Oh, never. Of course not. Jonathan is an institution here—part and parcel of the place."

The picture-gallery was approached by a spiral staircase, its steep, high steps worn with years of usage. Narrow slits in the ancient walls admitted the only light, and Kit uttered a hasty warning.

"Wait a moment! I'll strike a match. These stairs are beastly dangerous and uneven."

By the flickering gleam of a succession of matches they climbed to the top without accident and thence emerged into the long gallery where hung the portraits of dead and gone Wynsboroughs. Beruffled gentlemen and ladies of Good Queen Bess's time, who looked as though they could hardly have turned their stiffly held necks without breaking them; gay cavaliers with laughter in their eyes and love-locks on their shoulders, who had yet bravely followed Charles the Martyr through good and evil repute and even to the steps of the scaffold itself; pompous-looking Georgians, Early

Victorians—they were all there, even down to the portraits of the present holder of the title and his two sisters.

Lady Mary looked very simple and sweet and lovable in hers, but Patricia's glance passed on rapidly to the neighbouring portrait of Lynette, involuntarily searching the lovely painted face for any likeness to that son whom she had brought into the world and died without seeing. It was rather a sad face, as though some premonition of the sorrow which was to end her life so tragically already shadowed the young eyes that looked out of it. There was no very definite point of resemblance betwixt mother and son, Patricia decided. You could not pick out a single feature that was common to them both and say that Kerry had his mother's eyes or his mother's mouth, as the case might be. But none the less, there was an unmistakable likeness—it lay in the contour of cheek, the width of brow, perhaps—and Patricia turned sharply away from the picture, conscious of a sudden odd pang of remembrance.

Kit glanced at the portrait casually.

"That's Aunt Mary's sister," he vouchsafed. "She was the beauty of the family, and died quite early in life."

"Yes," replied Patricia soberly. "I know. Lady Mary told me last night."

Something in her tone seemed to rivet Kit's attention. He regarded her curiously.

"Do you mean she told you about—about my cousin?" he asked doubtfully.

"About Kerry—yes."

He emitted a low whistle of surprise, glancing round instinctively as though to assure himself they were alone.

"That's rather odd. You know, my uncle won't allow his name to be mentioned."

"So she said. But, you see, I happen to know him quite well. I met him in India. That started it."

"Great Jehoshaphat! Fancy your knowing the family black sheep!" Kit was silent a moment in sheer astonish-

ment. Then he added warningly: "You'd better keep mum about your acquaintance with him in front of Uncle Blair. The mere mention of his name is like a red rag to a bull."

"It wasn't a bit like that to Lady Mary. She was simply longing to hear everything about him."

He nodded.

"Yes. She was awfully fond of him. It nearly broke her heart when the smash came and Kerry went away. It knocked the stuffing out of the old man, too, though he'd die by inches sooner than admit it."

"I suppose you were here when it all happened?"

A curious look of restraint passed over Kit's face. Whatever he knew, Patricia felt sure that he was not going to confide his knowledge any more than Lady Mary had done. By common consent, the Wynsboroughs' lips were closed concerning that episode of the past in which Lorimer had apparently figured so prominently.

"I was only a young shaver at school when Kerry actually left Strangways—he was five years older than I, you know," replied Kit guardedly. "And neither my uncle nor aunt ever chose to enlighten me as to what the actual quarrel was about. It must have been a bad knock for my uncle," he went on, more easily. "He idolized Kerry. I was never anything more than second-best"—laughing good-humouredly. "I shouldn't have had a look in at all but for the fact that I happened to be the heir! If Uncle Blair could have swopped us over and made old Kerry the heir in my place, he'd have done it any day of the week."

"You take it very philosophically," observed Patricia.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, it's natural, after all. Kerry's mother was Uncle Blair's favourite sister, you see, whereas he pretty well hated my father. I believe they used to quarrel like blazes. Besides," he added, with a short laugh, "if you stay here long enough, you'll find it's advisable to cultivate a philosophical attitude."

"Why?" asked Patricia bluntly.

"Because everything and everybody is offered up on the altar of family pride."

He spoke with so much harshness that she turned and looked at him in quick interrogation. This was no mere generalization, she felt sure. It sprang rather from some individual fount of bitterness.

"Why, Kit," she began uncertainly. "Do you mean——"

He interrupted hastily, as though anxious to deflect her thoughts.

"I was thinking of poor old Kerry," he said awkwardly. "And Lady Mary."

"Lady Mary?"—in surprise.

He assented.

"Yes. Every one knows that her poor little romance was knocked on the head by Uncle Blair thirty years ago."

With a throb of sudden pity Patricia recalled the look of gentle sadness which lay in Lady Mary's eyes. It was the sadness of one who has long submitted to the inevitable. Time had softened the bitter rebellion of years ago—the ardent longing of passionate youth, leaving only the submissive wistfulness of age.

"Tell me about it," said Patricia gently.

"Oh, there's nothing much to tell. She was in love with a young doctor—just a general practitioner, you know. And of course"—rather savagely—"Uncle Blair considered he was far too insignificant a person to marry into the Wynsborough family, so he simply stamped on the whole affair. And poor Aunt Mary gave in."

"But, good gracious, how antediluvian!" exclaimed Patricia, aghast.

"Exactly," agreed Kit. "But Uncle Blair has extremely old-fashioned ideas about being 'head of the house' and so on. No one gets their own way here—unless it happens to be his way, too. You're not even expected to have an opinion of your own."

Patricia's eyes danced.

"I'm afraid I've got quite a lot of opinions of my own," she suggested.

Kit glanced down at her with some amusement. That pointed, determined little chin of hers premised a good deal of self-will. He could picture matters becoming somewhat heated if there should ever arise a clash of wills betwixt Patricia and her godfather.

"A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," he observed mischievously. "We're rather run on the lines of the feudal system here. Perhaps you'll effect a reformation."

And Patricia, thinking of the man who had wandered in desert places for so many years, answered earnestly:

"I wish I could."

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISION OF THE NIGHT

IT had been a busy morning at the Rectory. Nancy Waybrant, the Rector's daughter, had only yesterday returned from visiting some friends in Somerset, and although Martha, cook and general factotum, had done her best to keep things straight during the absence of her young mistress, the place had acquired an odd, unhomelike appearance. In various inconspicuous corners lurked accumulated dust which would never have found a day's abiding-place if Nancy herself had been at home to hunt it out with brush and duster, vases were void of flowers, giving to the rooms a curiously lifeless appearance, as though the soul had gone out of them, leaving only an inanimate shell behind, and the condition of the Rector's study was frankly deplorable. Papers and letters lay strewn in wild confusion over his desk, while the sheets of next Sunday's sermon were reposing comfortably on the floor.

The Rector admitted the state of things with a whimsical smile. He was a tall, thin man, with the delicate face of a scholar and quiet, grey-blue eyes wherein the touch of dreamer and visionary was balanced by an underlying humour. Ineradicably absent-minded and untidy, he depended entirely on his daughter to maintain some sort of order in his study, hence the demoralized aspect which it presented after her brief absence from home. It was she, too, who saw to it that his inner and outer man were properly cared for—the question of meals and suitable apparel being matters which the Rector himself was prone to overlook—and who checked with a firm hand the too generous impulses which

would have led him to bestow the greater part of his small income upon the necessitous poor of the parish, quite forgetting, in his eagerness to help, that his own butcher's and baker's bills still lay unpaid on his desk!

Nancy gathered up the scattered sheets of the sermon and shook her head at him reprovingly.

"It's no use smiling in that ingratiating way, Dad," she said as she proceeded deftly to evolve order out of chaos. "The floor is *not* the proper place for a sermon."

"It is not," he agreed penitently. "And I'm afraid I can't offer any explanation as to how it came there."

"I can. Probably, just when you were launching out into 'Thirdly,' old Mrs. Milligan or someone turned up to tell you that it was her rent-day and that she had only been able to save up half the money. Whereupon, in your usual lordly way, you swept your sermon aside and dived for your cash-box. I know you!"

The Rector's eyes twinkled.

"I rather believe something like that *did* occur," he acknowledged.

"And will go on occurring to the end of the chapter," scolded Nancy. But her eyes were very soft.

They were extremely good friends, these two. Bernard Waybrant's wife had died when Nancy was hardly more than a year old, so that from her earliest days her father had represented everything in the world to her. He had been both playfellow and counsellor, and the most dreary time of her whole life had been the two years of the war which he had spent at the Front as a chaplain to the troops. At the end of that time ill-health had driven him reluctantly back to England. With a body too frail for the courageous spirit which dwelt within it, he had been one of the first to volunteer, shirking neither hardship nor danger, and sharing everything, good and bad as it came, with his "boys." And in return they had fairly idolized him. Some of them had been recruited from his own parish of Stranwood, and the

"padre" of the trenches was still "padre" in the village to the men who had known and loved him out in Flanders.

"And now that you've tidied me up and so added another quota to your feeling of sex superiority, what is the next move?" demanded the Rector, smiling.

Nancy cast a satisfied glance round, her brown eyes lingering happily on the freshly gathered flowers which had made the rooms somehow "come alive" again. Then, as a bell rang loudly in the hall, she tucked her arm into her father's.

"Lunch is the next item on the programme," she announced. "And, afterwards, I'm going up to the castle. Lady Mary is sure to have heaps for me to do after I've been away for a whole fortnight."

"One of our indispensables, I perceive," murmured the Rector mockingly. In return for which she pinched his arm as she led him into the low-ceiled dining-room.

For over a year now she had been in the habit of going to Strangways two or three afternoons a week in order to help Lady Mary with the different parish matters in which that large-hearted little person actively interested herself. Beyond this, she wrote letters for her, arranged flowers, and made herself useful in a variety of ways, and the small salary she received for these services formed a very welcome addition to the Rectory exchequer.

"I'm particularly looking forward to going to Strangways this afternoon," she remarked. "Martha tells me that Lord Marchdale's god-daughter arrived there while I was away. Have you seen her yet, Dad?"

"She was at church on Sunday."

"Oh, was she? Did you speak to her?"—eagerly.

"Yes. Lady Mary took pity on my lonely bachelor condition and invited me to lunch. So I met the new arrival."

"What's she like? How old is she? Shall I like her?"

"What a tornado of questions! I certainly think you'll like her. I should say she's about one or two and twenty,

decidedly pretty, with a rather attractive little air of distinction—and has been somewhat spoiled.”

Nancy's face had fallen while he was speaking.

“I hate spoiled people,” she observed disappointedly.

“I wasn't meaning ‘spoiled’ quite in the way in which you're thinking of it,” replied Waybrant, his grey-blue eyes reflective. “There's nothing of the pettish, spoilt child about her. It's rather the woman who has been spoiled.”

“Padre dear, what do you mean?” begged Nancy appealingly. “You've gone off on one of your usual big, deep lines of thought and left me high and dry!”

“Not a very deep line, Nance.” He smiled across at her, as she faced him with a perplexed wrinkle puckering her brows, and very briefly sketched for her benefit the kind of life which Patricia had led in India.

Nancy's youthful face looked slightly awe-stricken.

“Why, it was almost like being royalty,” she said soberly. “I think I shall be frightened of her.”

“Oh, no, you won't. There's nothing snobbish about her. But she's almost bound to have got hold of a wrong sense of values—a luxurious environment has played such a big part in her life. And a wrong sense of proportion may lead one to mistake the shadow for the substance.” He paused, then added musingly: “She'll be a splendid woman one day—when she has found herself.”

Her curiosity sharpened by the conversation she had had with her father, Nancy set off briskly after lunch in the direction of the castle, which lay no more than a mile distant from the village of Stranwood. Servants invariably seemed to have a warm corner in their hearts for the Rector's daughter, and Mitford, the impeccable Strangways butler, who admitted her, even unbent so far as to smile as she bade him a friendly good afternoon. Following her usual custom, she made her way to the sun-parlour—a delightful octagonal room, built out from the main body of the house, which trapped the sunlight all day long—and found it tenanted

only by Patricia and Kit. The latter sprang quickly to his feet at her entrance.

"Nancy!" he exclaimed.

And Patricia, glancing up from her occupation of picking up the stitches Lady Mary had dropped in the scarf she was knitting, destined ultimately to adorn the head-gardener's latest baby, surprised a sudden unwonted eagerness in Kit's usually lazy eyes. Being a woman, it afforded her considerable enlightenment, and it was with increased interest that she turned to greet the new-comer as Kit performed the necessary introduction.

The two girls presented a striking contrast. In spite of her youth and boyish slimness of outline, Patricia had acquired a certain elusive poise during the years she had spent at the Residency at Coomara, whilst about Nancy there was an ingenuous *gaucherie* that was not without its own charm. She appeared younger than her twenty years, and it was a very innocent face which smiled shy friendliness at Patricia—a round little face framed in soft brown hair and with wide-open brown eyes. The nose was nondescript—"merely a nose," as Kit had kindly informed her on one occasion—and the lovable mouth curved readily into sweet-tempered laughter.

Her shyness soon vanished, however, and in a short time she was chattering away as happily as though she were back in the shabby, homely old Rectory.

"You know, I was really quite alarmed at first at the idea of meeting you, Miss Luttrell," she said, nodding her head seriously. "I thought you'd be rather—superior, and all that"—waving her hand expansively.

"So she is," replied Kit with extreme gravity. "Haven't you found it out yet? At any rate, even if you haven't, you needn't rub it in that you think she's such an inferior kind of person."

Nancy frowned him down.

"Don't be stupid," she retorted. "At least, not stupider

than you can help. Miss Luttrell understands what I meant, don't you?"—appealing to Patricia. "You see, living in a sort of state, like a princess, with sheaves of servants to wait on you——"

"Oh, but I wasn't!" interrupted Patricia, laughing outright. "There was nothing at all regal about it. And everybody has 'sheaves of servants' to wait on them in India, you know. A Commissioner has rather more than other people, because he has a lot of Government work to do, and entertains a good deal, too."

"Still"—Nancy regarded her pensively—"I think Strangeways was quite an appropriate place for you to come to. You wouldn't have liked an ordinary small house with just two servants—or perhaps with only a maid-of-all-work, like we have at the Rectory. You'd hate doing 'chores.'"

There was considerably more insight in the remark than perhaps Nancy herself was aware of.

"Fortunately, she's never likely to have to do her own 'chores,'" said Kit, "a beneficent Providence having endowed her with sufficient of this world's goods to pay some one else to do them for her."

"It must be heavenly to be like that!" sighed Nancy, with a frank and ingenuous yearning that was wholly devoid of the bitterness of envy. "It's the same with Mrs. Bethune, of course. I don't suppose she ever even darns her own stockings!"

"It sounds as though that typified delirious heights of bliss," observed Kit.

Nancy nodded vigorously.

"So it does. You've no idea what holes Dad makes in his socks, tramping round the parish every day. They're—they're like craters!"

"Who is Mrs. Bethune?" asked Patricia idly, when the laughter which greeted Nancy's heart-felt description of the state of her father's socks had subsided.

"Oh, of course, you won't have met her yet. She lives with her brother at Anton Roy, but they've been away in London since April. I think they come back this week. They're so rich it makes me gasp sometimes, just thinking about it," declared Nancy.

"'New' rich?" inquired Patricia indifferently.

"Oh, no," replied Kit. "They're friends of ours." There was an unconscious little touch of the old Earl in the way in which he differentiated the sheep from the goats by those few words which brought a smile to Patricia's lips, and the thought flashed fugitively through her mind that pride of race dies hard, even in these democratic days. "Mark Strown—Peggy Bethune's brother—is practically a millionaire," pursued Kit. "All the money from both sides of the family tumbled in to him, and the man Peggy married—she's a widow now—wasn't precisely destitute, either"—with a grin. "They're a lot better off than we poor land-owners."

"Haven't they any land, then?"

"Oh, enough, you know. Anton Roy's a pretty old place. But they don't own about half the county, like my unlucky uncle, so they're not plagued with tenants always clamouring for repairs and improvements."

"I think they live a sort of fairy-tale existence," said Nancy. "Anton Roy is an absolute duck of a place—not too big and not too small. Just perfect. And they have a flat in town, and a yacht, and several cars—everything in the world one could want!"

"And nobody on earth to consider but each other," supplemented Kit with a note of envy in his voice.

"And what are they like themselves, these fortunate people?" asked Patricia, smiling. "So far, you've only expatiated on their surroundings."

"Well, Mrs. Bethune isn't exactly pretty, but she's distinctly attractive, and wears lovely frocks and her hair is

always done in the latest style. She's the sort of person who never has a shiny nose, you know—not even in hot weather," expounded Nancy.

"Let her try India," commented Patricia dryly. "And is she as nice as she looks?"

"Nicer," affirmed Nancy whole-heartedly. "And Mr. Strown is a perfect dear. I don't wonder she's so fond of him. He just spoils her. He must be an adorable brother to have."

As she finished speaking, the door opened to admit Lady Mary.

"Ah, there you are, my dear," she said, greeting Nancy affectionately. "Mitford told me you were here. You can't think"—laughing—"how glad I am to have you back. The village Clothing Club accounts would have got into a dreadful muddle while you were away, I'm afraid, if Jonathan hadn't come to my rescue."

"I could have helped you with those," suggested Patricia reproachfully. "Why won't you ever make use of me?"

"We keep you entirely for ornamental purposes," submitted Kit impertinently.

"There was no need to trouble you, dear child," said Lady Mary. "Jonathan is always ready to do any little odd job like that. In fact"—with a half-humorous, half-indulgent smile—"it would hurt his feelings dreadfully if I'd asked someone else to do anything he might have done."

"He only just tolerates me, you know," put in Nancy cheerfully. "He used positively to glare when first I came here! Now I think he's resigned to the fact of my comings and goings and regards me as a necessary evil."

"Poor old man! His eagerness to be of service to us outruns his strength nowadays," said Lady Mary kindly. "Come, Nancy, we'll go to my sitting-room and you shall straighten out all the tangles I've got into in your absence," she added, smiling.

Kit jumped up to open the door for them and, as Nancy

followed Lady Mary out of the room, he bent down and spoke to her in a low voice:

"I may see you home—afterwards?"

She made no answer, but a quick flush ran up under her clear skin till even the tips of her ears glowed rosily. When she had gone, Kit seemed to fall under a spell of silence. He stood staring moodily out of the window, his gay blue eyes clouded and despondent, and for a few minutes Patricia watched him sympathetically without speaking. At last she said quietly:

"We did agree to be pals, didn't we, Kit?"

He swung round, and for a moment his charming smile chased away the shadows from his eyes.

"I should rather think we did!" he replied heartily. "You're not thinking of going back on the bargain, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not. But what I thought was—if we're pals—couldn't you tell me what the trouble is? Has she said—'no'?"

He shook his head and a very brief, tender little smile crossed his lips.

"Then—then——"

"Why don't we get married and live happily ever after? Is that what you want to know?"

She smiled.

"I think it is. There doesn't seem any just cause and impediment. She's a great dear, Kit!"

His eyes flashed her a quick glance of gratitude. Then his face darkened.

"Don't you remember my telling you that everything here was offered up on the altar of family pride?" he said bitterly. "Well, that's the impediment. If I suggested that I wanted to marry Nancy, Uncle Blair would simply storm the place down. It—it sounds perfectly beastly even to say it"—with an angry, shamed look in his eyes—"but, to put it baldly, my uncle wouldn't think Nancy—good enough."

"Oh, Kit!" exclaimed Patricia in dismay. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure"—morosely. "It would be merely a case of Aunt Mary and her doctor-man over again. Uncle Blair's just about a century behind the times in his outlook on things."

"Have you spoken to him about it?"

"Spoken to him? Good Lord, no! He'd simply be abominable to Nancy if I did—and I won't have her insulted!—and he'd probably forbid her ever coming to the place again. And, you know, the bit Aunt Mary pays her is a sort of help. The Waybrants are frightfully hard up. The present man's father, who had the living before him, was rather a gay old bird in his day and left mints of debt behind him which the padre is religiously paying off."

Patricia's face softened.

"How like him!" she exclaimed. "You know," she went on a little wistfully, "there's something about him that reminds me of my father. I think, if ever I were in trouble, I'd like to go to the padre for advice."

Kit nodded understandingly.

"Yes, I know what you mean. Unfortunately, in this particular case"—with a wry smile—"he's rather off the map as a consultant."

Patricia's brows drew together.

"Are you sure—*sure* that godfather would be so frightfully opposed? You know, I thought, when Mr. Waybrant was here last Sunday to lunch, that he seemed to like him quite a lot."

"Oh, he does," admitted Kit readily. "*As a parson.* 'In his sphere,' as he would say"—mimicking his uncle's crusty speech. "But when it came to a question of Nancy and me, it would put things on quite a different plane altogether"—grimly.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"What can we do?"—irritably. "Except wait indefinitely

—or make a bolt for it some day! I've got enough private means to rub along on. Kerry and I each came in for a certain amount of our own when we reached twenty-five years of age, irrespective of Uncle Blair's money. Only Nancy would hate it—I mean doing anything like running off."

"Of course she would. And it would make it very difficult for the padre afterwards—as well as for Lady Mary."

"Yes"—soberly. "Poor little Aunt Mary has had such a rotten time all her life—her own love-affair squashed out of existence, and then losing Kerry——"

"And, if you ran off and got married, it would mean losing you, too, I suppose?"

Kit smiled rather bitterly.

"No doubt of that! I should be hoofed out—for keeps."

"You can't do it, Kit," said Patricia, after a pause.

"That's what Nancy says. I suppose it's true"—gloomily. "At present, we're just sort of marking time—though we've no real hope of anything turning up."

"I've turned up," she remarked quaintly. "I shall have to begin that reformation you spoke of. Though I don't quite know how you start reforming a godparent!"

She smiled reminiscently, recalling the sole battle she had had so far with Lord Marchdale, a battle in which she had certainly come off victorious, achieving the only kind of victory that is worth having—a victory that leaves the vanquished your friend.

It had all started from an unexpected but quite characteristic act of generosity on Marchdale's part.

"Can you ride?" he had demanded gruffly of Patricia one day, and in answer to her composed reply that she had ridden since she was six: "Then go down to the stable and take a look at the little chestnut mare I've bought for you. She's in the fourth stall."

Patricia had been touched by his thought for her, but he waved her gratitude away.

"Well, I don't suppose you'd stay here long to be penned up in a hen-coop, would you?" he remarked curtly.

"Do you want me to stay?"

He fixed her with his fierce old eyes, and there was odd wistfulness underlying the harshness of his voice as he answered briefly:

"Yes. I want you to stay."

The actual trouble had arisen afterwards, over the question of whether Patricia could be permitted to ride alone, unattended by a groom. She herself had ridiculed any other possibility, but Marchdale was obdurate on the point.

"In my young days no self-respecting woman of your position rode out without a groom following her," he snorted.

"But these are *my* young days," objected Patricia. "I think, if I had a groom tagging round whenever I went out, I should end by murdering him!"

"You're a self-willed young woman!"

"I know," she assented regretfully. "I'm awfully sorry, godfather, but I'm afraid I shall have to refuse the mare—if a groom is attached to the gift."

Marchdale had received this information in dead silence, but there had been an unwilling twinkle somewhere in the depths of his eyes as he turned away without answering. The next morning, dressed in workman-like riding kit, Patricia had encountered him in the hall.

"Are you going to let me off that groom, godfather?" she had asked meekly.

"I suppose I shall have to," he snapped. "I don't want any of my men murdered in cold blood."

So Patricia had planted a light kiss on his cheek and departed, and a few minutes later, his monocle jammed irately into his eye, but with a queer, reluctant smile on his lips, he had stood at the South Room window and watched her canter off down the avenue.

But to get her own way in a small matter that only touched herself individually was one thing. To attack the

deep-rooted prejudices of an autocratic old man, as they affected him and his house, was quite another. And Patricia recognized the fact with a sigh.

"You're quite right, Kit!" she burst out impetuously. "Godfather makes a perfect fetish of 'the family.' First the Dresden China lady, then Kerry Lorimer, and now you—and incidentally Nancy—all made miserable just because you happen to be Wynsboroughs and godfather a kind of Lord High Commissioner of the lot! I don't suppose he would have quarrelled so irretrievably with your cousin if he hadn't considered he'd done something unworthy of the Wynsboroughs!"—a touch of scorn in her fresh young voice.

Kit's face grew grave.

"I don't know about that," he said doubtfully. "I believe Kerry really must have done something pretty rotten. Even Aunt Mary says it was—dishonourable. And she's not usually given to being censorious."

Patricia was conscious of a curious little sinking of the heart. She told herself that it was only because she couldn't bear to think of the Sahib's being deceived in the character of someone he had trusted.

"Anyway," she said, "there would be nothing dishonourable about your marrying Nancy. Godfather ought to be made to see reason."

"No earthly chance of it," asserted Kit despondently. "Well"—squaring his shoulders—"it's no use grouching. I suppose we shall go on as long as we can stand it, and then one day we shall reach the end of our tether—and there'll be another scandal at Strangways! I expect it would have happened before this but for——" He broke off abruptly as the door was thrown open and Mitford came quietly into the room. Whether he had overheard anything not intended for his ears it was impossible to say. His face preserved its customary expression of mask-like impassivity.

"If you please, sir, his lordship wishes to see you," he stated, and withdrew as noiselessly as he had entered.

"Oh, hang!" observed Kit concisely, as he rose with obvious reluctance to obey the avuncular mandate. "I expect he'll keep me jawing about estate matters till nearly dinner-time. He's got an idea for some cottage improvements in Stranwood," he explained, "and for the last few days we've lived in a hectic atmosphere of architects' plans and estimates."

"Don't be lazy." Patricia shook her head at him smilingly. "After all, it's your job. I rather admire godfather for going into everything so thoroughly himself. Such a lot of landowners leave too much to their agents."

"Oh, the old boy never shirks his duty. I'll admit that," conceded Kit. "Only"—boyishly—"it's Nancy's first day here, you know, and this probably settles my chance of seeing her again to-day."

He departed in search of his uncle, leaving Patricia to meditate on the strange jumble of qualities combined in the make-up of her godfather—the ingrained pride and prejudices, the scrupulous recognition of the responsibilities attached to his position, the arrogant, domineering temper, and underneath it all, like a silken strand interwoven with threads of harsher texture, that unexpected wistfulness which revealed itself at odd moments in his dry speech, betraying a hidden hurt that even the passage of many years had failed to heal.

Patricia went to her room that night obsessed by a strange sense of restlessness. She was beginning to feel as though, with her coming to Strangways, she had stepped suddenly into a stream of impalpable cross-currents. She could sense the light touches of secret things that vitally affected the lives of those around her.

Sleep was far from her. She felt too keyed up to rest. Making no attempt to undress, she twisted a soft wrap round her bare shoulders and, kneeling down by the open window, leaned out into the warm May night.

One by one she watched the distant cottage lights quiver

and go out, while the faint sounds of life and movement in the castle dwindled gradually into silence, until at last the deep stillness of the night enveloped her.

Outside, the park lay drenched in moonlight, its grassy slopes transformed into a mystical grey-green sea slashed and broken by black clumps of trees and shrubberies, showing grotesque and stark in the pallid light. The beauty of Strangways held a suggestion of deep melancholy, she thought, of something almost sinister, as though a blight rested on the place. It seemed to her as if the Past had stretched out long tentacles, drawing the castle and its inmates into a relentless grip and strangling all the joy and happiness which the Present might hold. Shadows lurked in unsuspected places—shadows of swift and sudden partings, of loves that had been unfulfilled, of pride and anger, like a flaming sword, destroying so much that was sweet and tender and beautiful in life. She recalled something that Bernard Waybrant had said to her as they strolled round the garden together on Sunday afternoon. She had made some comment concerning her impression of the grim atmosphere prevailing at the castle, and he had answered with a quiet significance: "It has been a place of tragedies."

A place of tragedies! She thought the brief phrase described it with a terrible accuracy. First there had been Lady Mary's poor little romance, shattered at the dictates of an old and outworn shibboleth. Then, in monotonous succession, had followed Marchdale's thwarted love for her own beautiful mother, the death of his favourite sister, and, finally, that bitter happening which had driven Kerry into the wilderness and left the old Earl and his sister with only their pride to hide their unhealed wounds. And now it seemed that history was destined to repeat itself in the matter of Kit and Nancy!

With a slight, irrepressible shiver, Patricia rose quickly from her knees. She had lingered by the window longer than she thought. The night breeze was blowing with a

sudden chill across the garden, and from the landing below her room came the sound of a clock striking midnight.

She bestowed a last glance on the tranquil park, sleeping in the moonlight, and lifted her hand to draw the curtains. Then stood suddenly still, arrested by a stealthy movement near one of the clumps of trees. Someone was standing there, screened from observation by the density of shadow. She could just discern the outline of a man's figure.

Rather fearfully, she craned forward. No man, unless it was one of the Strangways keepers, had any business to be prowling about at this hour of the night. All at once the man lurking in the shadows moved, stepping forward from the dense obscurity of the trees as though trying to obtain a nearer view of the house. In the dusky half-light his figure looked vaguely familiar—tall and supple, with its careless, arrogant pose, hand on hip. Then he lifted his head and the moonlight fell full upon his face.

Patricia felt her heart give a great throb, as for a moment her eyes and the eyes of the man down there in the moonlight looked straight into each other.

"*Kerry!*" The word broke from her in a strangled whisper.

With a swift movement he turned and plunged back into the shadows, and she was left wondering whether her eyes had deceived her or whether it could be in very truth Kerry Lorimer who had come out of the night and gone again.

CHAPTER XIV

A CONFLICT

IT was a glorious day. June was in the air, sunny and breezy and fragrant of flowers. Overhead, filmy streamers of white cloud floated gaily against the brave blue of the sky, like fairy banners proclaiming the coming of summer. Even Queenie, the chestnut mare Patricia was riding, seemed to have caught the infection of general light-heartedness, for she threw up her head, snuffing the air enjoyably, and pranced delicately on all four shining black hoofs, making skittish little side-steps to right and left, like a *première danseuse*, instead of trotting soberly along the road as a well-brought-up quadruped should.

Patricia, however, engrossed in her own thoughts, paid little attention to the mare's ebullition of spirits, merely adapting her lithe young body to the Terpsichorean mode of progression with all the ease of one to whom good horsemanship is almost second nature. She and Queenie had become very well acquainted by this time, and, although the mare was a nervous, high-strung animal, there was not a suspicion of vice in her whole composition.

So that Patricia insensibly allowed her thoughts to wander where they would, and they kept returning irresistibly to that night, more than a week ago now, when she had seen Kerry Lorimer from her bedroom window, standing alone in the moonlight.

Or thought that she had seen him! To this moment she had been unable to decide whether it had been really he himself, in the flesh, whom she had seen, or whether the nocturnal intruder had been someone else, bearing a superficial resemblance to him which had deceived her. The

vision had been so brief. For a single instant a man's figure had shown itself, silhouetted in the moonlight, the next it had been swallowed up by the shadows.

The sheer improbability of its being Lorimer was the strongest argument against the supposition that it was really he. He had told her, before they parted, that he was leaving England at once, and, even allowing for the possibility that some unexpected occurrence had detained him, his departure was not likely to have been postponed by more than a few days. He was too keen to get quit of the country to admit delays. "England holds nothing for me now—except memories that are better forgotten," he had told her once. She had not understood him at the time. But now, in the light of all that she had learned since she came to Strangways, his meaning was clear enough.

With a feeling almost akin to panic she realized to how great an extent he was still dominating her thoughts. Since she had said good-bye to him in London, it seemed as though everything in the world had combined to keep him in the foreground of her mind—the unexpected discovery of his kinship to Lord Marchdale, the secrecy which shrouded the happenings of ten years ago, and now, finally, that brief vision of the night when it had seemed to her that she had looked straight into Kerry's eyes.

With an impatient movement she gathered up the reins more firmly, and Queenie, instinctively recognizing the fact that her rider's attention had ceased to wander, stopped pirouetting and broke obediently into a canter which brought them swiftly to the lodge gates.

With a nod and smile to the lodge-keeper, Patricia passed through the gate, crossed the highroad, and turned down one of the wide, grassy tracks which led away into the depths of the Forest. She frequently rode there, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by Kit, and the spell of the great, silent Forest had already fallen upon her. She was growing

to love it a little more each day. There was something gripping, enthralling in that seemingly endless vista of tall trunks, with the light—coolly grey on a day of cloud, like a mist of gold when the sun shone—slanting between them.

This afternoon, with the sun blazing hotly overhead, the air seemed pungent with the scent of fir and pine, as they thrust upward, dark and sombre against the young fresh green of oak and beech. Here and there interposed the pale gleam of a silver birch—like some slender dryad of the woods, with outstretched arms veiled in her shimmering hair—and all along the aisles and alleys of the Forest the ground was carpeted with pine-needles, so that the mare's hoofs fell softly as though she went on velvet.

Once Patricia passed a cottage, set alone in a clearing. Probably it belonged to one of the keepers. She paused and drew rein, wondering if he realized in how pleasant a place his lines had fallen. It was a cosy-looking cottage, built of reddish brick over which the magic of wind and weather had stippled a tender, plum-coloured bloom, mellowing it into harmony with the soft hues of the trees that stood guard around it. A drift of smoke rose lazily from the chimney, curling up into the still air, and the aromatic scent of a wood fire mingled pleasantly with the smell of the pines.

Presently a woman came and stood at the open doorway, laughing down at the chuckling baby she held in her arms. She shaded her eyes with her hand, as though watching for someone, and a moment later a man came striding through the clearing and joined her. Bending his head to kiss her, he took the child from her and set it gaily on his shoulder. Then he and the woman turned and went back into the house together, his arm around her waist, and the door closed behind them.

It was all very human and happy and peaceful, and Patricia rode on with an odd little ache at her heart. A new, indefinable emotion seemed to have stirred within her.

It was as though some hidden, inmost fibre of her being had quivered responsively to that glimpse of simple homestead life.

A mile or two further on she turned aside down a narrow bridle-path, where the silence and loneliness of the Forest seemed to enfold her even more closely. It reminded her of the silence of the jungle, and her thoughts went back to that day—what years ago it all seemed!—when she and the Sahib and Noel Harvey had gone tiger-shooting together. She could recall each incident of the day as clearly as though it had but just happened, from the thrill of excitement which ran through her at the sound of Noel's first shot to that last moment when, from the *howdah* of the elephant, she had looked back and seen Kerry standing alone by the body of the dead tiger, hand on hip. . . . She caught her breath sharply, swift and certain recognition suddenly sweeping every doubt from her mind. That lithe, arrogant figure, silhouetted in the quivering afternoon glow of the Indian sunlight, was the same which she had seen in the moonlit park at Strangways.

All at once, without any warning, the mare snorted and swerved, and in an instant Patricia's hand had tightened on the bridle, steadying her. Glancing round to discover what had frightened her, she saw a green-painted caravan standing in a grassy space between the trees, its shafts empty, while the horse which had evidently been employed to draw it was tethered a few yards away. On the steps of the caravan, absorbed in his own thoughts and with the stem of an unlighted pipe clenched between his teeth, sat Kerry Lorimer, while beside him lay an Irish terrier, his moist black nose quivering to every fascinating scent the breeze brought his way and with one adoring paw just touching his master's foot.

For an instant it seemed to Patricia that her heart stopped beating altogether, then it set off racing in her side like a mad thing.

"So it *was* you!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Kerry jerked his head up suddenly at the sound of her voice, and she thought that for a brief moment she saw a light—surely a light of welcome—spring into his eyes. But it vanished almost as quickly as it had come—so swiftly, indeed, that she wondered if she had only imagined it. Stuffing his pipe into his pocket, he rose and came towards her.

"If you mean the other night," he said in a voice of cool detachment, "yes—it was."

He was coatless and hatless, wearing a khaki shirt, carelessly open at the throat, and a pair of breeches which had unquestionably seen better days. Altogether, he was about as disreputable a figure as he had appeared on that memorable occasion when he had so unceremoniously presented himself in the middle of the Residency garden-party at Coomara.

"What—what are you doing here?" asked Patricia. Her voice was not quite steady. His resemblance to the Kerry she had first known—to the Commissioner's "mystery man"—seemed to have suddenly wiped away the intervening months, and with them that safe sense of comradeship which the voyage on the *Cassilia* had engendered. She was acutely conscious that she was alone with the man from the wilderness—alone with him in the intense solitude conveyed by the Forest.

A glint of humour showed in Kerry's eyes at her question.

"As you can see—I am caravanning," he replied.

"But I thought—I thought you had left England," she stammered uncertainly.

"I did intend to. But"—looking at her deliberately—"something kept me."

"Oh!" She avoided meeting his gaze. Catching sight of the Irish terrier who had trotted after his master in order to investigate matters from a canine point of view, she asked flurriedly: "Is that your dog?"

"It is. Paddy"—calling the terrier to his side—"we are being visited by one of those superior beings who live in

houses built of stones and mortar that I've sometimes told you about. Come and make your salaams to the lady."

He lifted him up in his arms, and Paddy wriggled ecstatically and licked Patricia's glove with an excited pink tongue as she patted his head and spoke to him in the language which every self-respecting dog understands. But he would probably have greeted her with equally riotous enthusiasm in any case, having a blind faith in his master's powers of discrimination.

"That's a nice little mare you're riding," commented Kerry, depositing Paddy on the ground once more and regarding the chestnut with a critical eye.

"Yes. My godfather gave her to me," answered Patricia. And all at once her cheeks flamed scarlet, as she recollected the embarrassing relation he occupied towards Lord Marchdale. For the moment, with the memories of India crowding up around her, she had positively forgotten it.

Kerry watched the colour surge up into her face with coolly ironical eyes.

"So you know?" he said quietly.

She fenced.

"Know what?"

"Know that you're breaking all the laws of the Medes and Persians by conversing with the outcast?"

She nodded.

"I'm my own mistress," she said with a little touch of hauteur. "I can do what I choose. Besides——" She broke off.

"Besides?" he queried swiftly.

But she remained silent, aware that his eyes were raking her face mercilessly.

"Won't you finish what you were going to say?" he persisted.

She hesitated, then spoke impulsively:

"I don't believe you did—what they think."

He had been stroking the mare's satin neck as they talked. Now he dropped his hand abruptly to his side.

"Thank you," he said. "That's very kind of you. I'm sure I shall find your belief in me very sustaining."

The palpable sneer in his voice brought the colour flooding to her face again. She felt almost as though he had struck her. Her lips quivered uncontrollably.

"I—oh, how can you speak like that?" she burst out stormily. "You always misunderstand—you always did! And then—then you jeer at one." With an effort she checked the trembling in her voice. "I'll go," she said more quietly.

But before the mare could advance a single step a hand descended on her bridle.

"No. Don't go," said Kerry, with a sudden disarming smile. "I'd no right to say that. Forgive me—and stay and have tea with me here instead."

But Patricia was not to be so easily mollified.

"It was horribly unfair of you," she returned hotly. "And—and I don't want to stay with you any longer."

Once more she made as though to go, but the hand that gripped the mare's bridle never altered its position by a hair's-breadth. Into Kerry's eyes had come a look of definite purpose.

"Did you hear me?" said Patricia, staring pointedly at the restraining hand.

"I heard you," he answered composedly. "But, you see, I want you to stay."

There was a note of dominant assurance in his voice which roused all her latent opposition.

"I'm afraid your wishes don't interest me," she replied distantly. "Will you please release my horse's bridle, Mr. Lorimer?"

She waited for him to comply, but he made not the slightest movement towards doing so. With an impatient shrug

of her shoulders, she raised her crop and struck the mare lightly on her flank. Unprepared for the blow, Queenie made a sudden bound forward—a bound which would have flung most men off their feet. But Kerry was as tough and pliant as whipcord. His grip of the mare's bridle tightened instantaneously, and after one or two nervous, protesting plunges she stood still.

Patricia's whole spirit rose in wild rebellion. She recognized, with a sudden unerring consciousness, that he was again asserting his mastery over her, just as he had asserted it a dozen times during the course of their acquaintanceship in India. Always there had been that sense of struggle between them—of cool dominance on his part, of reluctant yielding on hers. But this time she would not yield. He had behaved insufferably, flinging her proffered belief in him back in her face. And because he had offered an apology afterwards—the kind of tolerant apology you might offer a child—she was not going meekly to accept it and stay to tea with him at his dictation. With an impetuous movement she lifted her crop once more and brought it down with all her force on his wrist.

The mare jumped violently as the crop slashed past her head, and tried to rear. But Kerry's grip on the bridle did not relax in the smallest degree, although an angry weal rose on his wrist where the riding-whip had struck him. He soothed the frightened animal, and when she was quiet again he met Patricia's glance with one of calm interrogation.

"Well?" he said in unmoved tones. "Will you dismount now?" He spoke precisely as though nothing had happened.

And then she realized that he was not waiting to see which she would do—whether go or stay. He was simply waiting until she yielded her will to his and obeyed his wish—waiting with a quiet, inflexible decision that sent an odd little thrill of fear through her. Against that iron determi-

nation of his she felt as futile as a butterfly battering its wings against a granite rock.

Suddenly her glance fell on his wrist with that long, purplish weal scored across it where she had struck him. It made her feel rather sick. She looked at him appealingly, but there was no sign of relenting in his eyes. Their glance was keen and bright and hard as a hawk's—and as concentrated. Slowly she let the reins fall from her hands.

"You'll stay?" he asked.

She nodded silently, not daring to trust her voice. She felt suddenly spent and nerveless, as though the battle of wills which had been fought out between them had robbed her of all strength. Without a word he lifted her down from the saddle and set her on the ground beside him, and as he led her horse away to tether it, she stood watching him, conscious of a strange intermingling of feeling—of wonderment at her own sudden and utter surrender and of a queer, breathless gladness that he had not let her go.

CHAPTER XV

STORM

WHEN Kerry returned from tethering the mare he found Patricia still standing where he had left her. He regarded her tentatively, a rueful, half-penitent expression on his face.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked. And his eyes—those eyes that had been so inexorable a few minutes ago—laughed down at her.

Against her will the suspicion of a smile quivered at the corners of her mouth. It was so like a man, she reflected, to bully and browbeat you until he got his own way and then to try and make friends again in that disarming "little boy" fashion! But she was not going to let him off so lightly.

"Forgiven?" she queried. At least he should be forced to put his plea into words.

"For making you a prisoner in the wilderness."

She was silent a moment. Then:

"Why did you do it?" she said.

The laughter went out of his eyes and the old bitter expression with which she was familiar came back into them.

"I did it," he said slowly, "because half a loaf is better than no bread. And I wanted my half loaf. . . . God! How I wanted it!" he added under his breath.

She listened to him gravely, and he seemed to interpret that quiet gravity as a refusal of his plea. Suddenly squaring his shoulders, he stepped back from her.

"I suppose you can't forgive me?" he said harshly. "Well, you're free to go if you want to—I won't stop you again.

After all"—with a short laugh—"the wilderness is not—and never would be—the place for you."

Patricia remained silent. The abrupt change in his manner disconcerted her. She stole a glance at his lean hatchet face with its straight-lipped mouth, and something that she sensed in it—something appealing and hurt that lay behind the harsh lines into which it had fallen—determined her reply.

"It is—a very charming wilderness," she said hesitantly. His face cleared as if by magic.

"Then I'm forgiven? Good! Now let's make tea. I'll initiate you into the delights of camp life."

With a word he seemed to have swept aside everything extraneous to the moment. Forgotten, apparently, the fact that the circumstances were a trifle unusual, that he was the "black sheep" of the family, that his presence in the Forest—even in England at all—required some explanation from the standpoint of the woman who had learned, by this time, the reason of his exile. He appeared intent solely on making the impromptu tea-party a success, and insensibly Patricia capitulated to the spirit of the moment.

Followed by a very self-important Paddy, she accompanied him to where a stream of clear water rippled its way from some distant source and waited while he knelt on the bank and filled his kettle. Then from some store-place concealed within the caravan's anatomy, he fetched out kindling wood and, with the help of fallen branches gathered from beneath the trees, built and lit a fire. Before long the kettle was singing cheerfully above the flames.

"I've no table-cloth," he remarked, as he deposited the cups and saucers on the ground. "But, as you see, I can go one better than a tin mug and plate on this occasion."

For an instant his glance met and held Patricia's, and there rushed over her the memory of their talk at the tent door on the night he had first dined with her and the Sahib in camp. A faint flush rose in her cheeks, but she made no

comment and Kerry busied himself once more with the preparations for tea. His larder yielded a big loaf of new bread, and golden butter and a pot of yellow honey—homely fare, but eaten in that pine-scented air, with the whisper of the Forest all about them, a feast fit for the gods.

During the course of tea it seemed as though he deliberately avoided the mention of any topic of which the roots ran deeper than the surface. But presently, when the picnic meal was over and they had reached the cigarette stage of the proceedings, he remarked suddenly:

“For a woman, you’ve kept your curiosity remarkably well in hand.”

“My curiosity?”

“Yes. Or have I assumed too much in thinking my continued presence in England surprised you somewhat? Perhaps it didn’t interest you enough even for that!”

“Naturally it surprised me,” she answered quietly.

He smoked in silence for a minute or two. Then, without any preliminary, he flung another question at her.

“Are you happy at Strangways?”

The abrupt change of subject startled her.

“What has that to do with it?” she asked blankly.

“Everything. I stayed in England to find out—just that.”

“And did you suppose you would discover it by prowling round the castle at midnight?” she asked, smiling a little.

“No.” His face altered. For a moment it seemed to Patricia as though the boy of years ago—defiant and miserable and desperately lonely, as he must have been—looked out of his eyes. “No. I came—that night—just to have a look at the old place.”

He spoke brusquely, but she could detect the undertone of wistfulness in his voice, and she knew then that for Kerry, as for other exiles, the nostalgia for the familiar places of his youth had been not the least part of the burden he had carried.

“Tell me,” he went on rapidly, still in the same abrupt

way. "How are they all? My uncle and Aunt Mary? And young Kit?"

"Godfather—never speaks of you," said Patricia rather low.

He uttered a short laugh.

"No. I suppose he wouldn't," he returned shortly.

She went on eagerly, still conscious of that inarticulate pain behind his curt speech. "But Lady Mary wants to know every little thing I can tell her. She often asks me some tiny detail that only anyone who—cared very much—would ask. Who darns your socks, and whether you remember to change your clothes when you're wet—things like that. I wish"—she hesitated, doubtful how the suggestion would be received—"I wish you and she could meet."

"Impossible!" The word was snapped out like the shooting of a bolt.

"It's not impossible," she persisted, "unless you make it so. I know I could persuade her——"

"Thank you," he interrupted swiftly, "I've no wish for you to *persuade* her into seeing me!"

But Patricia refused to be turned aside from her point.

"I didn't mean that," she explained patiently. "I didn't mean that at all. Lady Mary wouldn't need any 'persuading' to see you. What I meant was that I should have to convince her that it could be arranged safely—without any risk of godfather's finding out. Will you see her—if I can fix it?" There was a wistful appeal in her voice, but it failed to move him.

"No," he returned with decision. "What's done is done. You can't build bridges between past and present."

"You could. Oh, you could, if everyone would lend a hand," urged Patricia earnestly. The tragedy and pathos of the whole thing, of this break between those who had once been linked together by the tenderest of ties, filled her with pity.

Kerry faced round on her suddenly.

"Do you know exactly what happened ten years ago?" he demanded.

"No," she admitted. "Only that you were supposed to have done—something dishonourable." Her voice sank on the last words.

"And my uncle accepted the fact without hesitation," he commented dryly.

"But you didn't do it—whatever it was," asserted Patricia confidently. Somehow she had no longer any fear that he would treat her affirmation of faith with the harsh mockery he had accorded it an hour ago.

"No," he said quietly. "I didn't do it."

"Then why"—her voice was very pitiful—"why didn't you tell them so—deny it at the time?"

"Because I could give no proof—and my uncle wasn't in the mood to accept my bare denial without proof! Besides, a boy of twenty is a bit too hot-blooded to take the accusation they made against me with meekness!" His eyes blazed, and Patricia could see that even ten years had not sufficed to cool the fury of bitterness which the recollection of the charge that had been brought against him still roused in the man beside her.

"They knew me," he went on mordantly. "And yet they could believe—what they did believe. Good God——" He broke off, then added more quietly: "Old Mathers was the best of the lot of them. By the way, is the old fellow still alive?"

"Yes. He's librarian now. He and I are quite good friends. I sometimes go into the library and have a chat with him, and he shows me his treasures."

"Poor old chap! He was very cut up when it all happened—cried like a baby. I suppose"—sardonically—"he couldn't bear to think there was a blot on the family escutcheon."

"Is there no way of straightening out things?" she asked. "Godfather is getting old, and——"

"Is as tyrannical as ever, I've no doubt."

Unable to contradict this statement, Patricia remained silent. He laughed with a grim kind of amusement at her discomfiture.

"I'm afraid the task of peace-maker is a thankless one in this instance," he said. Adding, after a pause: "There are not many people with your capacity for faith, you know."

The colour deepened sensitively in her face. She was not quite sure whether he was jeering at her again or not. But she answered him quite steadily.

"I believe in my friends."

"Friends!" he repeated in a peculiar tone. He stared hard at her and she turned her face aside, unable to meet his gaze. Carried away by her sympathy, by her sense of the pitiful tragedy of all that had happened in the past, she had been lifted out of any consciousness of self, bent only on striving to find some way of mending matters. And now, without warning, the intimate personal note had been struck once more, and she was suddenly, vitally conscious of herself and of the man beside her—awaiting his next words with a strange sense of tumult.

But before he could speak again a sudden flicker of lightning quivered through the air, followed, after a brief pause, by a long roll of thunder. With one of those unexpected changes to which the English climate is subject, the aspect of the day had completely altered. Unnoticed by Kerry or Patricia, sheltered as they were beneath the green canopy of leaves which spread above them, the sky had been gradually darkening for some time and was now overcast by heavy clouds. The breeze had long since died away and a curious stillness had descended upon the Forest, muting the murmurous hum of insects and the call of the birds. The atmosphere had grown oppressively sultry.

At the first sound of thunder, Paddy, who had been edging his small body closer and closer to his master during the last half-hour until now he was lying with his brown

muzzle thrust almost into his pocket, sat up abruptly and emitted a wail of anguish. He hated a thunderstorm more than anything on earth, and he gazed reproachfully at Kerry as though demanding why he permitted such a thing to happen. The latter had already risen to his feet and was reconnoitring the patches of lowering sky visible between the branches of the trees. A stifled exclamation escaped him.

"I'm afraid we're in for a bad storm," he said, turning back to Patricia.

She sprang up quickly.

"Then I had better start for home at once," she answered.

"You'd better do nothing of the sort"—bluntly. "You'd just get into the thick of it."

As though to justify his words another flash of lightning zigzagged across the sky. The crash of thunder which succeeded it sounded much nearer. Patricia's face paled a little, and Lorimer glanced at her interrogatively.

"Are you frightened?" he asked.

"N-no. But I don't like thunder," she admitted honestly.

Came another flash, and a mighty roar of almost instantaneous thunder. This proved altogether too much for Paddy's nerves. With a deprecating upward glance at Kerry, he buttoned down his tail and made a bee-line for the caravan, scrambling pell-mell up the steps, and remained crouched in the doorway, uttering pathetic little yelps as though beseeching his master to come and take refuge likewise.

Lorimer smiled. "You'd better follow Paddy's example," he suggested.

But Patricia did not move.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" she said uneasily.

Another flash, and a clap of thunder that seemed to reverberate immediately overhead. Followed a shrill neigh and the sound of trampling hoofs. At the same time a few big drops of rain pattered down upon the leaves.

"Those horses are frightened!" exclaimed Kerry sharply.

"I must see to them. You go into the caravan. You'll be all right there."

Without another word he ran off in the direction where the horses were tethered. From where she stood Patricia could not see them, but she could hear them plunging as they strained at their halters and Kerry's voice calling to them reassuringly as he ran.

Another spattering of rain sent her hastily towards the caravan, and she had hardly reached it before the storm broke in good earnest.

It was somewhat dark inside the caravan, except now and again when a flash of lightning lit up every corner of it with piercing brilliancy. But as her eyes grew accustomed to the dusk, and helped by those intermittent flashes of lightning, Patricia gathered by degrees an impression of the interior—of a tiny room, the walls lined with pitch-pine, of cupboards skilfully arranged to occupy the least possible space, of a stove and book-case, and, last of all, of a narrow bunk, Spartan in its simplicity.

She crossed over to the book-case, urged by an odd curiosity to know what books accompanied Kerry on his solitary journeyings. The Bible, a volume of Marcus Aurelius, the old Persian tentmaker's "Rubáiyát," and a much-thumbed volume of the Koran—these composed the small library. Half-hesitatingly she lifted down the "Rubáiyát." It fell open, as though of long habit, at the twelfth quatrain:

"A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!"

Her cheeks suddenly hot, she closed the book hastily and thrust it back into its niche upon the shelf. She felt as though she had pried into some secret place.

The storm now appeared to be gathering in violence.

The lightning flared almost continuously, while the thunder seemed to crash from one end of the heavens to the other. She even thought the caravan itself rocked a little with the vibration. Rather nervously she steadied herself with a hand pressed against the cupboard. A thunderstorm always affected her unpleasantly, stringing up her nerves to a high pitch, but now, all at once, she was conscious of a sensation of actual fear. She felt so alone—surrounded by those giant trees that seemed recklessly to challenge the lightning with their tall tops. And the thought of Kerry, out in that awful storm, sent her heart racing unevenly in a new and overwhelming terror.

Fear added itself to fear. She clenched her teeth, trying to fight down her rising panic. But in spite of herself her limbs were trembling, and when a flash of lightning, more vivid than any which had preceded it, suddenly cut the gloom and went out in a shattering blast of sound, a sobbing cry forced its way between her lips.

And then from close beside her came an answer—a little whimpering whine from Paddy who, equally terrified, had crawled to her feet and lay there, shaking with fear. She stooped and lifted him up in her arms, and as she cuddled his warm body against her shoulder it brought her a queer, reassuring sense of companionship.

"You poor little thing!" she murmured crooningly. "Why, you're half frightened to death."

Paddy heaved a huge sigh of relief and burrowed his head under her arm. From this strategic position he even attempted to defy the elements with a nervous wag of his tail. He had been a very unhappy little dog a minute before. But now, with that odd confidence which dog-nature invariably accords the genuine lover of animals, he felt that all was well with him—or, at least, as well as could possibly be expected while the heavens above and the earth beneath were apparently in process of rapid disintegration.

Patricia, still hugging him in her arms, moved over to

the doorway of the caravan and looked out. All fear for herself had left her, but her anxiety concerning Kerry increased every moment. Why was he so long in attending to the horses? Had they become unmanageable through fright? . . . Perhaps he was hurt . . . lying out there in the storm, alone and untended! . . . Her mind conjured up a dozen possibilities of danger which might threaten him.

The rain was coming down in torrents now, but the lightning still flamed across the sky, illuminating the Forest with a pale, unearthly glare, while the thunder pealed and crashed as though the very world itself were splitting in twain. Patricia could hardly think connectedly. The conviction that Kerry was hurt or in danger grew and deepened in her mind till it became unbearable. Lowering Paddy hastily to the floor once more, she sprang down from the caravan and, careless of everything save her need to seek and find the man whose safety had suddenly become the one thing in the world that mattered, she set off running wildly through the Forest.

She ran blindly, heedless of the uproar and commotion of the storm around her, towards the spot where she knew the horses had been tethered. But when she reached it, it was to find that they were no longer there. There was no sign of them, or of Kerry, but the ground was trampled and churned up as though by the stamping of frightened hoofs.

Her heart throbbed with sickening apprehension. She covered her face with her hands, trying to shut out the thoughts that tortured her. But she must go on . . . go on . . . find him somehow where he wandered alone amid this turmoil of din and disaster. . . . And then, as she uncovered her eyes, she saw him coming towards her, striding through the bracken with his accustomed proud, free gait . . . unhurt!

“Kerry!”

The word had scarcely left her lips when a blinding light

struck across her vision. It seemed to her as though she were enveloped in a sheet of lambent flame, and at the same moment a deafening crash of thunder roared and reverberated around her, shaking the very ground beneath her feet.

She reeled, staggering under the shock, and pitched forward. A hoarse cry sounded close at hand. Then strong arms caught her as she fell, and she felt herself crushed against Kerry's breast. His voice, harsh and jangled out of all likeness to itself, came to her out of the surrounding chaos:

"Are you hurt? . . . Pat, for God's sake, speak!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

INSTINCTIVELY Patricia had shut her eyes against that blinding flash of light. Now, at the sound of Kerry's voice, she opened them and looked up into the lean, dark face bent above her.

"I'm not hurt," she said. She glanced shudderingly towards the tree, not two yards distant, from which the lightning, as it struck it, had ripped off every shred of bark, leaving the great trunk gaunt and naked. Death had passed very close to her—horribly close.

Kerry made no answer. Wordlessly he gathered her into his arms and she felt his lips on hers, crushed down upon them in a passion of relief unspeakable. Then, lifting her from the ground, he bore her swiftly through the falling rain, back into the shelter of the caravan.

He closed the door, shutting out the storm, and as they stood together in the little sanctuary she could see that his mouth was rimmed with tiny beads of sweat.

"I thought you were killed!" he said unsteadily.

And Patricia, meeting his suddenly haggard gaze, knew that all the defences between them were flung down. That swift moment of stress and danger had robbed them of all make-believe, leaving them primitive man and woman with no longer any subterfuge of look or word to hide their love from one another.

"Kerry!" It was hardly more than a whisper—the shaken whisper of a woman overwhelmed by the terrific realization which had come to her.

He turned at the sound and caught her roughly in his arms. His mouth sought hers, straining against it in fierce, pos-

sessive kisses. The love and passion which his iron will had thwarted and held back for months surged over her now in a resistless torrent. The gates had been opened. They could never again be closed.

When at last he released her she swayed a little on her feet. She had surrendered herself utterly—unconsciously responsive in every quivering nerve to the rush of his passion, and now she leaned back against the wall, her face hidden in her hands, spent with the tumult of her own emotion.

He stared down at her with brooding eyes.

"And that's the beginning and the end," he said, as though to himself. But there was such an intensity of bitterness in the low-spoken words that it penetrated to her consciousness even through the wild turmoil of her own thoughts. She did not speak. Slowly she let her hands fall to her sides, and the question she could not frame in words was written on her face.

"Don't you understand?" he said with a sudden violence born of the mental torture he was enduring. "I can't marry you. I can't marry any woman."

She did not pretend to misunderstand him.

"Do you mean," she said, "because—because of what happened—ten years ago?"

He bent his head.

"Yes," he answered shortly. "Because of that."

A faint, tremulous smile curved her lips.

"And did you think that I should let that stand between us?" she said, speaking with a tender derision. Her eyes glowed. "Haven't I said I believe in you? . . . I meant it, Kerry."

"Still it stands between us," he returned harshly. "I ask no woman to share a soiled name."

"But if she *wants* to share it? Why, even if you told me that you had actually been guilty of whatever it was of which you were accused, do you suppose I should care?"

"I care."

She drew nearer to him.

"Kerry," she faltered. "I don't think I understand. We—love each other. And you know you have my absolute belief. What more can I do—give?"

"No," he said, answering her first words. "You don't understand." His face hardened. "I know what you think. You're imagining it's from some fine, unselfish motive that I'm refusing to marry you—that I don't want you to join your life to that of a man with a tarnished name, and so on. Isn't that it?"

"Yes," she acknowledged in a low voice, flushing deeply.

His mouth took on a grim twist of mockery.

"Then let me assure you, you were never more mistaken in your life. I don't suffer from humility of that sort. In your sweetness, you're willing to stoop to me——" The sneering tones cut like a whip. "That's the point. No woman is going to stoop to me." His voice rang with the old dominant note she knew so well. "I'm not a story-book lover—on my knees. If I'd a clean name, I'd come and take you—on level terms, as a man should take his mate. But I haven't. So that ends it."

Patricia was silent. She felt stunned. His attitude was so utterly unlooked for. And yet, knowing his arrogant, untamable spirit, she realized that it was exactly the point of view which she might have expected him to take. He would never bend the knee to any woman. He could love well, but it would always be a passionate, demanding love—the love of the conqueror rather than the selfless devotion of the man to whom love is only another name for service. Kerry would be master of the woman he loved—never her slave. And if he could not come to her, royally free to take her on his own terms, then he would go through life without her, no matter what the cost.

But she was not going to see their mutual happiness crash to the ground without making a supreme effort to save it.

"Do you mean," she said steadily, "that you're going to let your pride—for it is pride—stand between us?"

"The past stands between us," he returned doggedly. "Now and always."

"Only if you will it so. Kerry"—entreatingly—"what is it, this little, little thing, to keep us apart? Something and nothing, that happened—or didn't happen—years ago. It isn't big enough to separate us."

His jaw set itself stubbornly.

"I don't ask tolerance—or indulgence from any woman."

"I shouldn't give you either the one or the other. How can you think it?" she cried passionately. "When one loves, other things simply *don't count*."

He turned away without reply, but the inflexible line of his mouth answered her only too surely. With a sick feeling of fear, she was beginning to realize the uselessness of her appeal.

"You—can't love me," she said at last, slowly and painfully.

With one stride he was back at her side, gripping her arm so tightly that the pressure of his fingers was agony.

"Not love you?" he said hoarsely. "I love you as I didn't know it was possible to love. I want you in every fibre of my being—so much that it's torture to be near you and not—take what I want."

There was fire in his eyes—a flaming light of passion barely held in leash that terrified her. She struggled desperately against him. With her free hand she sought wildly for the latch of the door.

"Kerry, are you mad? Let me go—let me go!"

He drew a deep breath, then released her so suddenly that she almost staggered.

"Don't question my love for you, then," he said savagely.

In the silence which followed she stole a fugitive glance at his face. The fire had died out of his eyes, and the stark bitterness which filled them suddenly gave her understand-

ing. He was suffering—suffering intensely. It was the inner torment of soul and body which had driven the brute uppermost in him. Like a trapped animal, goaded almost to madness by the bars which caged him, he had been ready to destroy even that which he loved.

That the bars were in part of his own making, welded out of a desperate pride and the accumulated bitterness of years, made no difference. Rather it added to the torment, seeing that his will warred against itself. An infinite pity and comprehension robbed her of all fear of him. She let her hand fall from the latch of the door, and stood hesitating. He regarded her sombrely.

“Well,” he said, “why don’t you go—while you can?”

She gave a faint, uncertain little laugh that was very near to tears.

“I can’t go, can I, until you tell me where the horses are?”

He brushed his hand across his eyes.

“I forgot,” he said. “No, of course you can’t. The poor brutes were scared to death. There’s an empty cottage close by, and I put them in one of the sheds belonging to it.”

He opened the door, letting in a stream of rain-freshened air. The storm had passed over, and the westering sunlight slanted between the trees, glistening on the drops of rain which still hung heavily upon leaves and grass.

“Will you wait here while I fetch your horse?”

She nodded, and he swung himself down to the ground and disappeared between the trunks of the trees. When he had gone, her gaze wandered desolately round the caravan. Probably, almost certainly, she would never see it again—this place where Kerry lived. Paddy lay curled up asleep on the foot of the bed. She laid a light hand on his head.

“Lucky little dog! You’re with him always,” she said under her breath.

He stirred and licked her fingers, then dropped back again into slumber. No black shadow from the past would ever

separate him from his adored master. He could afford to sleep in peace.

Presently Kerry returned, leading the mare, and in silence Patricia let him mount her.

"Good-bye," she said at last.

"Yes. It's good-bye," he answered. "I'm better out of England." An ironical light showed for a moment in his eyes. "The habits of the barbarian fit badly with civilized life."

"Where—shall you go?" she asked. She did not look at him, but kept her gaze fixed steadily between her horse's ears. "Back to India?"

"God forbid!" he exclaimed hastily. "No. I shall never return to India—now."

"Then—where?" She felt she *must* know—must be able to vision the place that would hold him. He was going out of her life. She knew it conclusively. There was not even room for protest, and in a chill, numbed way she submitted to the inevitable. She was hardly even conscious of pain as yet. That would come later.

"I'm going back to my island," he said slowly.

"Your island?"

"Yes," he answered. "It's only a bit of a place—a handful of green acres on the top of a rock, just off the Channel Islands. But it's mine. I have it entirely to myself. I go there when I'm sick of my kind."

The brief speech was illuminating. Like an echo from the past came back the remembrance of something Jim O'Halleran had once told her regarding Kerry: "*He's more or less of a mystery. Now and again he disappears for six months at a time.*"

"Was that where you used to go—from India?" she asked swiftly.

He nodded.

"Yes. And it's probably where I shall go to end my days."

She tried to picture it—the little, solitary island, severed from its bigger brethren by some natural upheaval of remote ages.

“And you live there—quite alone?”

“Quite alone,” he answered. Then, with a glint of derision in his eyes: “You’d hate it. It’s the exact antithesis of all that you demand in life. So, you see, it’s really just as well I’m not asking you to come and share my solitude.”

She quivered under the stinging mockery of the words. Gone was the passionate, demanding lover of so short a time ago, gone even the good comrade of the board-ship days. This was the Kerry Lorimer she had first known—the harsh, embittered man from the wilderness, whose cynical tongue had been wont to lash her with its contemptuous scorn of her and of her kind.

“I don’t think you need have said—that.” Her voice shook. She was hurt to the core of her.

His hand came down over hers, covering it. There was something oddly comforting in the quick gesture.

“Forget it,” he said swiftly. “And in token of forgiveness, promise me one thing. Will you?”

“What do you want me to promise?”

“Oh, I’m not trying to trap you into anything! Your father”—his voice softened incredibly for a moment—“asked me to look after you in as far as I could.” Patricia glanced at him in surprise, and he continued with an abrupt return to his usual grim, half-scoffing fashion of speech. “Probably he wouldn’t have done anything of the kind if he’d realized how peculiarly unfitted I am for the job. But, since he did, will you promise to let me know if ever you’re in a difficulty where I could be of any use?”

She made no answer, and, seeing her hesitation, he added quickly:

“For the Sahib’s sake, Pat. You must let me keep my word to him.”

“Very well,” she agreed, with a curious reluctance.

"Only"—smiling faintly—"I don't quite see how I could let you know, if you are hidden on your island. I don't suppose the postman calls there?"

"No. No one comes there. But still I shall get your letter. Send it to Brihou Island. It will reach me."

Patricia gathered up the reins, which had been lying loosely on her horse's neck. The sun, setting behind the trees in a stormy glory of thunderous purple shot with gold, reminded her that she must be returning home. At Strangways they would be wondering what had become of her.

"I don't suppose I shall ever need to write to you," she said.

"I hope not," he answered gravely.

The mare was pawing the ground restlessly, anxious to be gone. Patricia leaned forward in the saddle.

"Good-bye," she said in a low voice.

"Good-bye." He stepped back, not offering to touch her hand. With folded arms, he stood watching her as she turned the mare's head towards home and rode slowly away.

CHAPTER XVII

BROKEN THREADS

THE chestnut mare picked her way over the sodden turf with little, eager, nervous steps, glancing right and left with suspicious eyes at each twig or leaf that stirred to the movement of some forest creature, while her pricked ears quivered sensitively to any furtive sound. She was still conscious of the electricity in the atmosphere, her nerves still on edge after the recent storm. Once, when a big grey rat darted out of a thicket and scuttled across her path to dive once more into the undergrowth, she made such a leap that Patricia, wrapped in her thoughts and riding carelessly, was almost unseated. Thereafter Queenie sensed the hands which guided her gripping the reins more circumspectly, and it was not until horse and rider issued from the Forest on to a strip of road that Patricia again permitted her attention to wander.

They had emerged from the Forest some considerable distance from the point at which they had entered it earlier in the afternoon, and a couple of miles of winding country lane intervened betwixt them and the high-road upon which the Strangways gates were set. There was small chance of meeting any traffic on this lonely byway at that hour of the evening. The farmers' carts and wagons, occasionally to be encountered there in the day-time, creaking leisurely onward with their loads, were all long since safely housed in their sheds and the patient beasts which drew them stabled for the night, and Patricia, letting the mare's pace drop into a walk, gradually became re-absorbed in her thoughts.

The ways in which love makes itself known are diverse. To some people it manifests itself with the suddenness of

a thunderclap. They are going forward, plodding quietly along the pleasant neutral zone of everyday life, content with the little coloured splashes of fun and laughter, of family affection and of happiness, which they encounter by the way, when all at once it is as though a door had opened before them and they step across the threshold into a new and wonderful world, aglow with amethyst and gold, into a warmth and splendour of existence the fulness of which only those who have passed through that doorway may ever know.

To others love reveals itself more gradually, with the slow, beautiful inevitability with which dawn grows out of night or the cumulative glory of midsummer out of the hesitant beginnings of spring.

But to Patricia it had come as a conqueror. She had fought against it, intuitively fearing it and trying to escape it. Unacknowledged, even to herself, she had known that with the coming of Kerry Lorimer into her life had come also a vague disturbance, a sense of tumult, of thoughts and emotions that warred one against the other within her. He attracted and repelled her at one and the same moment. The man's dominant virility threatened her freedom of spirit, claimed a submission against yielding to which her whole nature rose up in protest.

Beyond that, she was subconsciously aware that Kerry was not in the least the type of man she would have chosen to fall in love with. In temperament, in that outlook on life which is built up out of experience and environment, they were as diametrically opposed as the poles. It seemed as though no two people could have less in common with each other. Instinctively, then, she had erected her fragile feminine defences, striven to evade the issue and to close her ears against that low, insistent beating of the wings of love which threatened her security.

And it had all been in vain! Kerry had never spoken

truer words than those he had uttered one moonlight night in the plains of India: "*Love doesn't trouble whether a man and woman have tastes in common. It just tangles them up and there they are.*"

All Patricia's carefully constructed barricades had been demolished, her stronghold forced, and though both she and Kerry, each for specific individual reasons, had fought and resisted the coming of this love to the uttermost, it had vanquished them, as love, the biggest thing in the world, always will vanquish the men and women who resist it—or make them pay for their resistance in blood and tears.

Quietly Patricia faced the fact that that brief few minutes in the Forest, when the imminence of death had rent the veil between them, was all that she and Kerry would ever know of love. She recognized, with a dull, torturing sense of finality, that he would hold immovably to his determination. To a man of his nature anything else was inconceivable. Even if by entreaty she prevailed upon him to accept her double gift of love and faith, she knew intuitively that it would never bring them happiness. To that streak of arrogance in him, that primitive male conception of the relations between man and woman, such a mating would hold an eternal element of irritation which would gradually permeate and destroy the whole fabric of which their happiness was woven.

It was impossible for him to accept a favour from anyone, least of all from the woman he loved. His was the royal prerogative—to lift her to her place beside him. He would never tolerate that she should step down to him. His pride might break, hammered to pieces on the millstone of life, but it would never bend. And since the years had closed over that episode of the past which had sent him, like Ishmael, into the wilderness, so that it was now too deeply buried for proof or disproof ever to be forthcoming, Patricia realized that, for her, love could be no more than

a shadow of itself—a dream, debarred for ever from fulfilment.

Henceforth, and through all the years that lay ahead, she would have only the remembrance of the past to cling to—a poor handful of scattered memories the whole treasure she had garnered. She shivered a little at the thought of all those years ahead which must be lived through. She was so young . . . there seemed so many of them. And not one of them would have any meaning, hold any promise.

"Courage to face life——" The words leaped at her out of the mists of the past, so clearly, so insistent in their fierce denial of the power of fate to thrust a man under that it almost seemed as though someone had uttered them aloud.

Her mouth set itself resolutely. Somewhere she was determined she would find that courage—the courage to pick up the severed threads of her life and re-knit them into a pattern of which, when the end came, she would have no need to be ashamed. Her father had found it when, with Barbara's death, all that had made life worth living had been taken from him. . . . If only he were here now, that best comrade of all, to help and sustain her through the inevitable bad days to come! For a moment the longing to see him again almost overwhelmed her. It was a sheer physical ache for the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand. A mist of blinding tears blurred her eyes.

. . . Her thoughts turned inward, her senses dulled to all consciousness of material things, she was for the moment utterly oblivious of the outside world. And it was just then that, without warning, a big car swung round the corner of the winding road.

The unheralded appearance of its grey bulk, with the slanting rays of the sun flinging a dazzling glare on bonnet and headlights, was too much for the chestnut mare, her nerves already fretted by the thunderstorm. She shied violently, and in the same instant reared and whirled round, and Patricia, caught unawares, was flung from the saddle.

She felt herself hurled through the air. A big heap of stones beside the roadway seemed to fly up towards her. Then she plunged headlong down, down into a black, swirling sea of unfathomable depth, and the dark waters of unconsciousness closed over her.

CHAPTER XVIII

"CHE SARÀ SARÀ"

THERE was a great weight on her head. Patricia was sure of it. Or was it that some one was holding it, pressing it downwards? That must be it, because, try as she might, she could not lift it. It seemed, too, as though a band of iron were clamped round her brows—bound so tightly that it hurt excruciatingly. The pulses in her temples beat madly against it.

The hands which held her down were pressed over her face, covering her mouth so that she could not breathe. She could hear her heart thumping like an engine as it strove to pump air into her tortured lungs. She struggled helplessly against them—those huge, soft, blankety hands that were stifling the life out of her. If she could not free herself in another moment she knew that she would suffocate.

At last, with an almost superhuman effort, she tore them away, and immediately a roaring noise, like that of rushing waters suddenly let loose, sounded in her ears and she found herself rising slowly to the surface from an abysmal depth of sea. The black, roaring flood surged and flowed all around her. Curiously enough, she no longer felt any anxiety or terror. That dreadful feeling of suffocation had left her, and the relief was so intense that nothing else seemed to matter. The sensation of gliding through the water was rather pleasant than otherwise.

Up, up, effortlessly rising until at last she was floating on the surface, rocking easily on the waves. She could feel the cool air against her face. Presently the rocking ceased. The waters seemed to be gathering themselves together into something tangibly solid—something that supported her tired body softly and firmly. . . . She was in bed, and from

somewhere close at hand came a subdued murmur of voices.

With an effort, she opened her eyes. The room upon which they rested was quite strange to her—not in the least like her bedroom at Strangways. The window was situated in a different place—and the door. She stared from one to the other with a dull sense of bewilderment. What could have happened? How was it she was occupying this unknown room? She tried to recollect how she could have come there, but the effort to think only made her head ache. Her brain felt indescribably tired and as though someone had tied a tight knot somewhere in the middle of it. Still, she must find out where she was, and she made a tentative movement to sit up in bed. She sank back again with a sharp moan of pain. The effort to move had hurt intolerably and set her head throbbing till she felt as though it would burst.

At the sound of her cry the murmur of voices ceased abruptly. Someone came quickly to her bedside and a light bandage, cool as ice, was laid across her burning forehead.

“Don’t try to move. Shut your eyes and try to go to sleep. You’re quite safe,” said a quiet, confident voice. At the same time a small, very feminine hand closed over Patricia’s and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

She looked up into a pair of hazel-brown eyes that smiled down at her in the friendliest fashion imaginable. They held no hint of anxiety, and, feeling suddenly sure that everything was all right and that she needn’t worry, Patricia let her weary lids close over her eyes once more and in a few minutes she was asleep.

When next she returned to a consciousness of mundane matters, lights had been lit and curtains drawn. A softly shaded lamp glowed from a small table at one side of the room, and the same hazel-eyed vision that she had seen before was seated beside the bed.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up,” it said. “You’ve had a lovely sleep.”

"Where am I?" asked Patricia. Her head still ached, but the pain was less intense, although even yet she could not think quite coherently.

"You're at Anton Roy," came the prompt answer. "Your horse shied at my brother's car and threw you on to a heap of stones."

Anton Roy! The name seemed vaguely familiar to Patricia, but the precise connexion of it with her own life eluded her. As though she divined the puzzlement of her mind, the owner of the hazel-brown eyes—who appeared to be of a curiously understanding nature—explained further in a clear, distinct voice that was quite easy to follow.

"I'm Mrs. Bethune—Peggy Bethune. And my brother is Mark Strown."

Patricia digested this information carefully.

"I know," she said at last slowly. "Nancy Waybrant told me."

Mrs. Bethune nodded.

"Of course she told you," she said. "Nancy's a great friend of ours. Now I want you to take this and then go to sleep again."

She held something to Patricia's lips and the latter swallowed it obediently. It seemed quite natural and really rather comfortable to obey the behests of this smiling and reassuring person, and Patricia settled herself to sleep once more with a soothed feeling of content and security.

A few minutes later, satisfied by the girl's even and tranquil breathing that she was really asleep, Mrs. Bethune tiptoed out of the room and made her way downstairs to where her brother was sitting, waiting for the latest news of the patient.

"Well?" he asked quickly, as she joined him. "How is she?"

"Oh, she'll be almost herself again by to-morrow morning—except for her bruises and the twisted ankle. She's

wakened, and gone off to sleep again. Give me a cigarette, Mark, and then I'm going to bed. I'm pretty tired."

"Yes, I expect you are. Let me tuck you up on the Chesterfield for a few minutes while you have a last smoke." He suited the action to the words, and Peggy yielded smilingly, snuggling down amongst the cushions with the beatific smile of a cherub. She was a *petite* little person—a pocket edition, as someone had once described her. Not in the least pretty, as Nancy had very truly remarked, but with an indubitable chic of her own, and that warm colouring of hazel eyes and red-brown hair, and skin with a golden over-tone, that invariably strikes an arresting note. Her thirty years sat extremely lightly on her.

"You're going to have a glass of wine and a sandwich before I give you a cigarette," observed Strown, going across to a table where the butler had left a tray in readiness.

He returned with a glass of champagne and a plate of delectable sandwiches, and she nodded up at him gratefully. In consequence of her brother's return home with an insensible young woman on board his car, dinner had been the merest pretence of a meal that night, and since the visit of the doctor, who had been hastily summoned to attend and had pronounced Patricia to be suffering from slight concussion in addition to sundry cuts and bruises, she had hardly left the girl's side. Now, with the hands of the clock pointing to midnight, she was feeling thoroughly played out.

"You always think of everything, Mark," she said appreciatively. "I don't know what on earth I shall do if ever you take unto yourself a wife and I have to play second fiddle—and look after myself!"

Strown's confirmed bachelorhood was a standing joke between them, and she waited tranquilly for the usual smiling disclaimer of any intention to change his state. But this time it did not come. Instead, he leaned against the chimney-piece and regarded her somewhat absently.

He made a very complete contrast to his sister. Tall and

slenderly built, with clean-cut features and a certain quiet air of distinction peculiarly characteristic of the well-bred Englishman, the only point of resemblance between them lay in the hazel colouring of their eyes. And here the difference betwixt brother and sister was determined by expression. Instead of the bright, humorous shrewdness of Peggy's glance, Strown's eyes held a mixture of grave kindness and whimsicality that was oddly attractive.

Perhaps Peggy did not notice the absence of any reply to her remark. At any rate, she made no comment, but rattled on quickly:

"What a mercy it was that Dr. Beresford could tell us who Miss Luttrell was and where she came from, so that you could ring up the Strangways people. Who did you get on to, by the way?"

"Marchdale himself," replied Strown. "Apparently the horse Miss Luttrell was riding bolted straight home, riderless, and he was just preparing to send out a search party when I telephoned. I assured him the doctor had said she would be all right and only needed quiet, or I think he would have come rushing over here post-haste to-night. He sounded half wild with anxiety."

"She must have worked a miracle, then, and softened his stony old heart," commented Mrs. Bethune. "It's not like Lord Marchdale to concern himself much over anybody."

"That's because once, I believe, he concerned himself very much indeed over—somebody," returned Strown enigmatically.

Peggy opened wide eyes of astonishment.

"What do you mean? Give me a cigarette, Mark, and don't talk in riddles."

He complied, and having lit her cigarette for her, pursued composedly:

"It's a genuine romance—one of those romances which quite a lot of people you wouldn't suspect of such a thing keep tucked away at the back of their lives."

Mrs. Bethune puffed at her cigarette.

“I certainly shouldn’t have accused that gouty old autocrat at Strangways of harbouring illicit romance in his composition,” she commented with vigour.

“There was nothing illicit about it,” replied Strown, smiling at her. “It is quite a commonplace little story—one of those commonplaces which spoil dozens of lives. Waybrant told me one day soon after we had heard that Marchdale’s god-daughter was coming home from India. He’s acquainted with all the ancient history of the Wynsborough family, you know. Marchdale was in love with Miss Luttrell’s mother, only, unfortunately for him, she was in love with someone else.”

Peggy sat up abruptly.

“So *that’s* why he has never married! Do you know, I shall like him ever so much better now I know that? I do like a man who knows his own mind and sticks to it. Most men, nowadays, when they’re turned down by one girl, simply miss a beat and go on to the next.”

“Oh, he’s not at all a bad old chap—once you get through the barbed wire entanglements,” said Strown. “Evidently Miss Luttrell’s got through them.”

“She’s awfully pretty,” observed Peggy dispassionately. “Didn’t you think so, Mark?”

“When you imagine you’ve half-killed a young woman because your fool chauffeur’s omitted to sound his horn, you’re not precisely in the frame of mind to notice her appearance particularly,” he replied quietly.

She laughed.

“No, I suppose not. I guess you felt pretty bad for a minute.”

“I felt very bad”—shortly. “Now, don’t you think you ought to go to bed? You look fagged out.”

“I am, rather. Yes, I’ll go.” She extinguished her cigarette and stood up.

“Good night, dear old boy. And don’t let that blessed

conscience of yours worry you any! Miss Luttrell is only very slightly damaged, thank goodness! She'll be quite all right in a day or two."

With that, Peggy departed upstairs to bed, but Strown did not immediately follow her example. Instead, he strolled out on to the terrace, palely washed by the light of the waning moon, and paced slowly up and down, with bent head.

The day's happenings took shape again in his mind. He could feel the rock of the car as it swung round the corner, see once more, outlined against the evening sky, the slim, boyish figure on horseback. Then came the sound of scrambling hoofs as the frightened mare whipped round, and the soft, deadly thud as that same slim figure was whirled through the air and tossed on to a mound of stones piled at the roadside in readiness for repairs, to lie there, limp and supine.

Afterwards, during the brief journey back to Anton Roy, she had lain in his arms, now and again talking incoherently in the rambling inconsequence of delirium, but for the most part lying still and unconscious, her face like a white flower against his shoulder, fringed lids hiding the gentian blue of her eyes.

A faint, whimsical smile curved his lips at the remembrance of his sister's reassuring remarks. With that strange prescience which sometimes warns a man when the fingers of fate are about to weave a new thread into the loom, he knew that it wasn't his conscience that would be troubling him!

He stood still, staring absently out over the moon-bathed garden. It was not yet too late to seek safety in flight . . . to turn his back upon the great adventure. . . .

The faint smile still on his lips, he re-entered the house. "Che sarà sarà," he murmured.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DREAM CHOICE

FOR the next day or two Patricia remained more or less oblivious of everything except the intense pain and stiffness of her limbs. Her whole body felt like one big bruise, and movement of any kind was almost impossible. Added to that, she had fallen with her foot twisted underneath her and a rather badly sprained ankle was the consequence. Even Lady Mary, who had hurried over to Anton Roy first thing on the morning following the accident, bringing with her a varied assortment of necessities from Patricia's wardrobe, was only allowed to remain with her for a few minutes, as Dr. Beresford insisted firmly on the necessity of keeping the patient quiet, and anxiety at Strangways had perforce to be allayed by constant telephoning.

At length, however, the time came when Patricia was allowed to sit up in bed. Peggy Bethune's breezy presence acted on her like a tonic, and during the time passed together in the sick-room a warm friendship sprang up between the two, notwithstanding the disparity betwixt their ages. Finally, the doctor graciously gave permission for the invalid to be carried on to a couch in the adjoining room. There was no question of her reaching it by any other mode of progression, since her ankle was still too painful and swollen for her to put her foot to the ground.

"Will you trust yourself to Mark?" demanded Peggy, coming in triumphantly with the good news when she had wrung permission from Dr. Beresford for the move to be made. "I hope you will, because *he* doesn't want to trust you to the butler and footman!"

"Do you think Mr. Strown can manage me?" asked Pa-

tricia rather doubtfully. "I'm five foot four, you know."

Peggy laughed.

"I don't think the length of you matters," she returned. "And your weight doesn't look as if it would be at all overpowering. I'll call him in." And she darted out of the room.

Apparently Strown had been waiting no very great distance away, for she reappeared with him almost immediately.

"I shall have to introduce you," she said gaily to Patricia. "I don't think you'll recollect much about your first meeting!"

Patricia shook her head.

"I remember nothing at all about it," she acknowledged.

"While I shall always remember it as about the worst five minutes I've ever been through," observed Mark quietly, as he took the slender hand she extended to him and held it a moment in his.

Patricia liked him at once, deciding with characteristic promptitude that both his inner and outer man were distinctly attractive. He looked about five-and-thirty, and his clean build, the pleasant modulations of his voice, his clothes and the way he wore them all pleased that fastidious taste in her which, during the early days of their acquaintance, had been the first thing that Lorimer had outraged.

"We began badly, didn't we?" she said, smiling up into the hazel eyes bent on her.

"Indeed we did," he agreed. "So I hope you don't make a practice of judging by first impressions. You must at least give me a chance to wipe them out, in this case."

"I think you *have* wiped them out," said Patricia with impulsive generosity. "Or, rather, your sister has, for you. She's been so good to me since I've been here. I'm afraid I've given you any amount of trouble," she added, looking across at Peggy affectionately.

"Trouble! My dear child, nothing we could either of us

do for you would be a trouble!" declared the latter warmly. "Most people in your place would be simply anathematizing us and our car and our idiot chauffeur for having been the original cause of your accident. We're horribly ashamed of ourselves."

Patricia's smile included both brother and sister. She loved the way in which they made common cause of everything—sharing each other's responsibility as naturally as though it were an accepted axiom that whatever applied to the one applied equally to the other, whether of praise or blame.

"I don't feel in the least like anathematizing you," she answered, addressing Peggy. "You and I would never have got to know each other half so well in such a short time if we'd been introduced in the ordinary conventional way."

"That's so," agreed Peggy heartily. "The conventions are the biggest barriers possible against making friends. Now, Mark"—turning to her brother—"do you think you can carry Patricia—or not? She herself seems to have grave doubts of your ability in that direction!"

Strown regarded the slight figure in its gay, embroidered blue kimono with amused eyes.

"I think it can be done," he asserted. "Will you trust me?" he added, stooping over the bed.

Patricia nodded, and the next moment felt herself lifted firmly and easily and borne into the adjoining room, where Mark deposited her on a big couch, banked up with cushions, which had been drawn near the window in readiness. With a few dexterous movements he tucked a leopard-skin rug across her knees and arranged the cushions so that they yielded the acme of support.

"There, is that quite comfortable?" he asked, standing back and surveying his handiwork.

She regarded him with smiling eyes.

"Perfect!" she assured him. "You seem to know just exactly how one wants things."

Her glance roamed over the room. In its quiet tonings of rose and grey it was a delightful room for an invalid, not overcrowded with furniture, and with only two or three exquisite pastel sketches breaking the expanse of neutral-coloured wall—ininitely restful. Here and there a great bowl of glowing roses added a splash of vivid colour. Patricia nestled into her cushions with a sigh of satisfaction.

"I think it will be a long time before I'm really well enough to be moved from Anton Roy," she observed humorously.

Strown's eyes met hers.

"I hope it will," he answered quietly. And then Peggy came in and the conversation slid away on to more general lines.

There is a certain type of person who appears to derive a mysterious and inexhaustible satisfaction from those virtuous platitudes which emphasize the fact that riches bring neither health nor happiness. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that wealth acts as a strong contributory factor towards the achievement of both these desirable states. And if ill-health and a sorrowful mind are fated to be our lot in life, a plenitude of this world's goods goes far to alleviate the one and to distract the other.

Certainly the period of Patricia's convalescence at Anton Roy passed very pleasantly, thanks to the fact that its owners were so rich that, as Nancy phrased it, it almost made her gasp to think of it. Everything that could beguile the dullness of that tedious process of "getting well" or that might contribute towards hastening it was immediately forthcoming, and Patricia, whose nerves were frayed by something more than the mere accident of her fall, was inwardly thankful for this period of forced inactivity, amidst surroundings that held no single jarring note, in which to take a fresh grip on herself.

During the first few days there were many quiet hours

when she was alone and able to envisage past and future in their relation to each other and school her mind to contemplate courageously a life which would henceforth hold no Kerry in it. Perhaps a certain fugitive sadness lurked in her eyes and mouth, but it passed unnoticed amid the natural alteration—the slight pallor and sharpening of the contour of her face—easily attributable to successive days of pain.

Later, when she was promoted to the Chesterfield downstairs—arriving thither with the help of a crutch on one side and Strown's arm on the other—she had more frequent visitors. Lady Mary drove across to see her almost daily, and occasionally Lord Marchdale would accompany her. The corners of his grim mouth twitched curiously the first time he saw the slim figure extended on the couch.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me that the mare was unsafe?" he demanded gruffly. "I'd have had her shot sooner than let you ride her, if I'd known."

"She's as safe as possible," protested Patricia, smiling. "Only we got caught in that thunderstorm, you know, and it tried her nerves, poor dear, and then the car's coming so suddenly round the corner was the last straw. Besides"—honestly—"it was really my own fault. I was thinking of something else at the moment, and when she whipped round like that it took me unawares."

"Well," he returned grumpily, "now you see what comes of insisting upon your own way. If you'd had a groom with you——"

Patricia went off into a shout of laughter.

"Dear godparent, if I'd had a whole procession of grooms trailing behind, they couldn't have prevented my being thrown off. They could only have picked up the pieces—and Mr. Strown did that quite competently."

"Oh, of course, it's useless to argue with a woman," snapped Marchdale crossly.

Patricia beamed at him engagingly.

"Quite. So you'd much better make up your mind to let me have my own way over things."

The old man tugged at his moustache to hide a smile.

"I suppose I've no choice. Am I to sell the mare, or what?"

"Sell the mare? Sell Queenie? Why, of course not! You don't suppose I'm afraid to ride her again, do you?"

"No. I didn't suppose you were afraid," he admitted, with a grudging kind of approval.

Another visitor was Bernard Waybrant, and the assiduous visits of Kit and Nancy coincided with such remarkable frequency that Patricia could not refrain from gently chaffing Kit on the subject.

"Well, it does give me a chance of seeing her home to the Rectory—without provoking comment in high places," he acknowledged. "You don't mind, do you?" he added boyishly.

"Of course I don't mind," Patricia gave the assurance whole-heartedly. "I do wish, though"—her face clouding over—"that it wasn't necessary."

"No one wishes that more than I do," returned Kit, rising abruptly and going over to the window. "What do you think he said to me the other day?" he went on hotly. "'The less you have to say to Nancy Waybrant the better. There's nothing gained by filling the girl's head with ideas above her station.' Looks promising, doesn't it?" he concluded savagely.

Patricia was silent a moment.

"It looks rather as though he suspects something," she admitted at last, with reluctance.

"Exactly what I thought"—grimly. "Well, if it comes to a bust, Nancy and I shall do a bolt, as I told you before. And that will be the end of it."

There was a new note in his voice—a note of dogged intention, and Patricia was conscious of a sudden definite

sense of apprehension. It was evident to her that Kit was finding the position of things increasingly irksome.

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "You mustn't do that. There have been quite enough family feuds and troubles at Strangways without adding to them."

He drummed impatiently on the window-pane.

"Perhaps you will explain to me, then, why one man, with the antiquated ideas of the generation before last, should be permitted to interfere in half a dozen peoples' lives and mess them up? It's—it's damnable!"

"I think one must make a certain amount of allowance for him," said Patricia soberly. "His own life has been very much spoiled—and embittered."

"Is that any earthly reason why he should spoil someone else's life?" he demanded. "It ought to be the very reason why he should let other people alone. I tell you, Pat, I don't believe in the last generation's gripping like grim death on to the present. They've *had* their turn. We've each of us got only one life—so why shouldn't we decide for ourselves how it's to be lived?"

"I know." Patricia's eyes were thoughtful. The passionate demand found an echo in her own heart, as it finds in the heart of all youth, eager for self-expression. "It's frightfully difficult to decide how much we ought to defer to the last generation—and how much they ought to defer to us. But I do think, in this case, Kit, you ought to go slow—for every one's sake. Sometimes knots unravel themselves after a time."

"Precious little chance of that happening in this case! And, meanwhile, Nancy and I are to waste years and years waiting round for it to happen."

She smiled.

"No, not years and years. But a year or so longer wouldn't hurt you. And, if some day godfather could be persuaded to look at things more reasonably, it would make for the happiness of everybody—including Nancy herself.

If you do a runaway marriage, you know what it means afterwards. A sort of hole-and-corner existence, with you unable to come to Strangways and Nancy more or less cut off from her father."

"I expect we should survive"—curtly.

"Oh, you'd survive all right. Only—you'd want to come back to Strangways. You don't realize it now. But you would. It's been your home. And one never quite gets away from the ache for the place that's been home." As she spoke, she was thinking of the man who, for all his ten years' wandering and the passionate resentment which had embittered him beyond most men, had yet come stealing back by night just to "have a look at the old place."

"Anyway, Kit, promise me one thing," she went on persuasively. "Promise me that, whatever happens, you'll do nothing definite—nothing like running away, I mean—without telling me first and giving me the chance to see what I can do with godfather."

"No one could do anything with him."

"I don't know about that," she urged. "If it came to a big thing like yours and Nancy's happiness, I'd like to try, at any rate. You know, he's got a funny soft spot deep down underneath his prickliness."

"Humph!" grunted Kit with frank unbelief. "I've never come across it."

"It's there, all the same," she persisted. "So will you promise?"

He hesitated.

"Please, Kit."

It seemed a long time before he answered, and Patricia waited anxiously for his reply. His expression was non-committal, and she had no means of gauging how much or how little she had influenced him. She only knew that somehow, in some way, she must prevent him from taking the law into his own hands and defying Lord Marchdale. If he did this, it would aim another deadly blow at the

old man's pride and quench the last flicker of happiness in life for Lady Mary—add one more to the long list of happenings which had made of Strangways a "place of tragedies." Even if Kit gave the required promise, there was no certainty that she would be able to avert disaster, but it offered a bare chance—a breathing-space in which something, perhaps, might be effected.

"Kit—promise me!" She spoke appealingly. Perhaps it was more the appeal of her white, tired face that moved him than her actual words. He capitulated suddenly.

"All right," he said. "I promise. And now I'm going. I've wearied you out," he added compunctiously.

She contrived a laugh.

"Never mind that. I've got my own way—and godfather will tell you that's all that matters in dealing with a woman!"

But when he had gone, she lay back very white and still on the couch, thoroughly exhausted with the effort she had made. Her ankle, too, was aching rather badly. It was thus that Strown found her, coming in a few minutes after Kit's departure.

"You look tired out!" he exclaimed quickly, his face taking on a look of concern. "I came up to talk, or read to you, whichever you preferred; but now that I've seen you, I shall do nothing of the kind. What you want is a rest."

She shook her head.

"Play to me instead," she said. "That will rest me more than anything."

Strown was an unusually fine musician and had beguiled many a wearisome hour for her by his playing. Very often when, as on the present occasion, Peggy was out paying calls or shopping in Ravenhurst, he would sit and talk with her, or read aloud, or play, and out of those hours alone together had grown a rather rare and understanding intimacy. And now he assented readily to her request.

"Very well," he said. "I'll play to you. But first I'm going to doctor up that ankle of yours. It's hurting you pretty badly, isn't it?"

"It is, a little," she acknowledged. "How did you guess?"

"I think I should always know if you were in pain," he said quietly.

For the first time in all these pleasant days of unthinking companionship Patricia was conscious of a sudden little panicky fear at her heart lest Strown were beginning to think of her in any other way than as a friend. She wished devoutly that Peggy would come in, but, glancing down at her watch, she realized that there was no hope of this for an hour or more.

Meanwhile Strown had rung for a basin of water to be brought, and now with steady, capable hands he unrolled the bandages in which the injured ankle was encased and proceeded to bathe it with a touch as light and deft as a woman's. He did it all so simply and naturally, just as a brother might have done for a favourite sister, that Patricia began to feel completely reassured and disposed to laugh at her own suspicions; and when at last he bound her foot up afresh and laid it gently back once more on the couch, she thanked him with a perfectly untroubled smile. She had not the least idea that, for him, those few minutes while he had held the slender white foot in his hand had been moments of fierce temptation, when it had been all he could do to refrain from pressing his lips to the satin-soft skin.

"Now," he said, when he had rearranged her cushions for her, "what shall I play?"

"I think I'm in a Chopin mood," she answered, smiling. "I want to be soothed, not stirred to violent emotions."

He nodded and, crossing to the piano, began with one of the *ballades*. It was evident in the very first phrase that he was a first-rate musician. He possessed the sure, firm,

comprehensive touch, the unforced strength, which is so essentially a man's prerogative and to which no woman pianist of relatively equal musicianship ever seems able to attain. It conveyed a sense of effortless ease, and Patricia lay back with closed eyes, listening contentedly as he passed from *ballade* to nocturne and from nocturne to prelude, playing ever more and more quietly until at last, to the exquisite B minor prelude, with its low, insistent monotone of falling rain, she fell asleep.

Nearly an hour later Peggy returned from paying a neighbourly call at the Rectory to find her brother still seated at the piano, improvising softly to himself. She had approached by way of the terrace and, catching sight of Patricia asleep on the couch, involuntarily paused on the threshold of the open French window. In a glance, her eyes took in the whole picture—the girlish figure, lying easily in the unconscious abandonment of slumber, and the man watching her as he played on quietly, fearful lest the sudden cessation of rhythmic sound should waken her.

Peggy drew back, but her movement attracted Mark's attention and he glanced towards the window. Across the room their eyes met, and there was that in his which suddenly, startlingly revealed to her his secret. She realized that she had inadvertently caught him "off guard," so to speak, and knew that the woman at whose side he was watching was the one woman in the world to him.

She drew her breath in sharply, with a little gasp, envisaging with all a woman's swiftness of perception what this would mean as regards the future. In a way she had lost him. She would never again stand first with him. And then quickly on the heels of this first thought—natural enough in the circumstances—came a rush of unselfish gladness for Mark himself. She smiled across at him, then putting her finger to her lips as though to indicate that she would not come in for fear of disturbing the sleeper, she slipped away, to conquer in solitude the undeniable ache,

the unwilling sense of grudge, born of the knowledge that she must henceforth take second place with the brother to whom she had hitherto been all in all.

Later, when Patricia woke, she was inclined to be a trifle feverish. Her ankle was still giving her considerable pain, and as soon as dinner was over, Peggy, observing the signs of stress on her face, ordered her off to bed.

"You've been having too many visitors," she declared firmly, when Patricia uttered a feeble protest. "Do remember that you can't tumble off your horse on to a selected heap of stones and bruise yourself from head to foot without feeling the effects for some time after. Will you help her upstairs, Mark?" she added, settling the matter off-hand, but with the disarming smile by which she always contrived to get her own way and at the same time make other people think it was their way, too.

Strown came over to the couch on which Patricia lay.

"I think we'll dispense with the crutch this evening," he said. "You look far too tired for the struggle upstairs. I'm going to carry you up like a baby."

Patricia yielded with an odd little sense of pleasure at his quick understanding. She was desperately tired, and in reality it was the contemplation of those two flights of stairs which had prompted her protest against the suggestion that she should go to bed. The journey to her room safely accomplished, Mark installed her in a comfortable chair and rang for Peggy's maid, who usually helped her to undress.

"You know just exactly how to spoil people," commented Patricia, sinking back into the chair with a small contented sigh.

"I always try to put my theories into practice," he responded. "One of them is that all nice women should be spoiled."

She laughed.

"What excellent ideas you have!"

"Do you think they would be good enough to live with?" he said swiftly.

Behind the lightly uttered words Patricia sensed a sudden definite demand. She looked up, startled, and a quick flush mounted to her cheeks as she met his eyes. Hastily turning her own away, she answered evasively:

"Peggy ought to be an authority on that."

And then, to her infinite relief, the maid came into the room, and with a brief good night Mark turned and quitted it.

Tired though she was, it was long before Patricia fell asleep that night, and when she did it was to dream that she was journeying alone across a wide and desolate place which held no single sign of human habitation. Somewhere in the midst of that deserted region she knew that Kerry was waiting for her. He had bidden her come to him there, and she had set out bravely. But all at once she was seized with a great fear of the vast solitudes which encompassed her. On every side stretched the illimitable plain, cutting her off from the dear familiar world of people and townships and villages which she had always known.

Panic-stricken, she began to run, and as she fled along she saw that, after all, she had been mistaken. There was a house close at hand, its lights glimmering hazily through the grey mist which hung above the plain. She uttered a cry of thankfulness, and as though in answer to her cry, the door of the house flew open and she saw Mark Strown standing on the threshold, his figure outlined against the warm, welcoming glow of light behind him. The revulsion of feeling was almost overpowering. Here at last was safety and security! She knew that Mark would take care of her. He always did. She had nothing more to fear.

He was coming to meet her, that dear, whimsical smile of his seeming to chide her terrors. But before he could reach her, a dim, shrouded form stepped between them, barring her way.

"Wait!" it said. The voice was stern, yet not wholly so. It held something else—sorrow and pity and a strange, yearning tenderness. "You must first make your choice. There are two ways open to you. If you cross that threshold the door will be closed, and you will seek for the desert places of the world in vain. . . . Choose!"

Patricia shrank back. She had come suddenly to the parting of the ways. Everything in her craved for the warmth and light and safety which lay beyond that open door. She looked along the pathless wilderness and shuddered. It was too hard a choice! And still that unknown, shrouded figure stood beside her—silently, inexorably awaiting her decision.

She shut her eyes, and with a sudden movement tried to thrust it aside, to force her way past it. But she felt herself caught and held by hands that were strong and ruthless as death itself—or as love which, giving all, demands all in return. She struggled against them.

"Choose!" reiterated the relentless voice.

She was helpless—trapped. With a cry she wrenched herself free, and woke to find herself in bed, trembling in every limb, and repeating over and over again:

"I can't! . . . I can't!"

CHAPTER XX

PEGGY'S OPINION OF HUSBANDS

SUMMER had slipped away, and with September a faint, chill freshness had crept into the air, covertly heralding the oncoming of winter. The trees were still clothed in foliage, the pasture-lands still deep in grass, but over all lay the shadow of coming change, and Patricia sometimes shivered a little at the prospect of an English winter.

But no thought of seeking a sunnier clime presented itself to her mind. Strangways, in spite of the grim secrets it harboured, in spite of the autocratic rule of its imperious master, with the resultant clashes of will and temper throughout the household, had somehow come to mean home to her. With each succeeding month her affection for Lady Mary had deepened, and the latter lavished upon her all that pent-up mother-love which had been debarred its natural outlet at the dictation of her brother's pride more than thirty years ago. Born of an older generation, when women's freedom of choice and action was practically a minus quantity, and of too yielding a nature to defy the head of the family and marry, with or without his approval, the man she loved, Mary Wynsborough had yet found courage to refuse to marry anyone else and had remained faithful to a memory, even at the sacrifice of all which motherhood would have meant to a woman of her type. And now this girl from the far-off East, child of the woman whom Marchdale himself had loved as vainly as ever his sister had loved her forbidden lover, had come to fill the emptiness of her heart, and Patricia knew that she was needed—infinitely needed—by at least one lonely soul at

the castle. And the knowledge that one is *needed* goes half-way towards the making of a home.

But there were others who needed her as well as Lady Mary. Lord Marchdale, ill-tempered old despot to the world at large, exhibited an odd, wistful kind of indulgence towards Patricia, while Kit had grown to turn to her as a man turns to a well-loved sister and comrade. It was her influence alone which had so far prevented an open rupture betwixt him and his uncle. The latter seemed suddenly to have developed suspicions concerning the friendship between his nephew and his sister's young secretary, and on more than one occasion he had flung at Kit a remark which contained a veiled warning, while his manner towards Nancy, when he chanced to encounter her, was becoming increasingly abrupt and irritable.

So that within the castle itself there were many calls upon Patricia's interest and sympathy, while, beyond its precincts, the friendships she had formed with Bernard Waybrant, and with Peggy Bethune and her brother, added yet further links to the new life which had knitted itself around her since her coming to England. And all these claims and demands that affection and friendship made upon her helped her enormously in the fight she was putting up to try and face courageously the fact that Kerry Lorimer had gone out of her life—gone deliberately and of set purpose, for a reason which, although she could see how he looked at things and realize the bitter pride upon which it was founded, seemed to her wholly inadequate.

Even Jonathan Mathers had his share in her life. The old man's solitariness, his fierce loyalty and devotion to "the family," appealed to her, and very often she would spare half an hour to chat with him in his beloved library. He always welcomed her with a shy, eager pleasure that fully rewarded her for the time she gave him. Sometimes he would expatiate enthusiastically upon the treasures in his care, proudly exhibiting this or that rare edition, and the

story of how the wonderful manuscript illuminated by Fra Angelo had come into the possession of the Wynsboroughs had been recounted to her more than once. But not yet had she been permitted to handle the precious document. It was carefully preserved in a special casket, glass-topped, so that on those days upon which the castle library and state rooms were thrown open to visitors the first sheet of its exquisite craftsmanship could be shown without any risk of damage to the ancient, yellowed parchment.

"But I'd like to see it all, Jonathan," Patricia would protest laughingly. "The other pages must be gorgeous. I want to handle it."

"So you shall, some day," he used to answer. "One very wet day when I've shown you everything else." The faded old eyes, behind their horn-rimmed spectacles, would light up with a gleam of fun like the eyes of a child in possession of a secret, and he would bustle away to the shelves that lined the walls and take down some other gem from the collection and enlarge upon its various beauties until the Fra Angelo manuscript was temporarily forgotten. On other occasions he would launch out into little histories relating to the earlier life of Kit and Lady Mary and the Earl, but always he avoided any mention of Kerry. There might never have existed any other nephew than Kit, so skilfully did he guard the family honour. More than once Patricia had felt tempted to tell him that she knew at least a part of the carefully hushed-up story, and then a kindly pity for the old man, a wish not to wound that burning loyalty of his to the family he had served so long and faithfully had kept her silent.

Perhaps the necessity for never mentioning Kerry at the castle, the compulsion of silence concerning him, was one of the hardest things she had to bear. To know how closely his life was knit to the lives of those around her and yet to realize that he was cut off from them, as a rotten bough is cut off from a tree, was a constant source of pain to her.

Sometimes she longed inexpressibly for a confidant—for someone to whom she might speak of Kerry without the consciousness that she was treading on forbidden ground, but a feeling of loyalty to the house, to the people whose hospitality she was taking and who had welcomed her and made her one of themselves, held her back from confiding in either Nancy or Mrs. Bethune.

The latter would probably have dismissed the matter with an incisive generalization such as Patricia had once heard her deliver in regard to a somewhat parallel case.

"What utter nonsense!" she had declared. "People aren't meant to have their sins tacked on to them for the rest of their natural lives! We're meant to *go on*, progress—not sit down in rapt contemplation of our past peccadilloes. Or other people's, either!"

In regard to the subject of matrimony her views were equally definite—although from her generalizations on that matter she emphatically excluded her brother. One afternoon, shortly after Patricia's return to the castle from Anton Roy, she had driven over to Strangways to have tea with her. Every one else having gone out in fulfilment of various engagements, the two had established themselves in the sun-parlour and drifted into that cosy, intimate kind of woman-talk which ranges over an incongruous multitude of topics, from fashions to infinity.

"Matrimony is either a necessity or a luxury," averred Peggy, when the subject cropped up. "And in either case it's a big risk. Men are polygamous by nature and selfish by inherited tradition, and any woman who marries must be prepared to cope with the one or the other—and probably both! We don't do it badly on the whole, either," she added reminiscently.

"Why, Peggy"—Patricia regarded her with laughter-filled eyes. "Were you—did you——"

"Did I cope with them? Of course I did—more particularly with the 'inherited tradition,'" she added grimly.

"But you mustn't think I've had a tragic married life. I haven't. Gerald and I rubbed along quite well together, although we hadn't much in common. Still, I shouldn't feel inclined to forego my freedom again!"—with a mirthful little grin. "Once married, twice shy, you know."

"I think men *are* inclined to be selfish," admitted Patricia thoughtfully. "Even nice ones."

Peggy nodded vigorously.

"It's bred in the bone, my dear. They can't help it. And, after all, it's mostly the fault of their mothers. They bring them up to believe they're a kind of superior being whose lightest wish must be gratified—and later on their wives have to pay for it. While their sisters have the necessity of unselfishness dinned into them as their *métier* from childhood upwards!"

Patricia smiled at her vehemence.

"I'd no idea you were such a cynic!" she exclaimed.

"I'm not," protested Peggy. "I only see men as they are—with their halos off! Now and then, of course, you come across the exception which proves the rule. And the woman who marries the exception," she added with a sudden softness in her voice, "is quite liable to find heaven on earth."

Patricia remained silent, reflecting curiously upon the streak of idealism which peeped out even from amidst Peggy's shrewd summing-up—that tender idealism which, though sometimes hidden, sometimes bruised and crushed down by the harsh realities of life, yet finds place in the make-up of every true woman.

"Now Mark will make an adorable husband," resumed Mrs. Bethune gaily, breaking in upon the other's thoughts. "He knows just exactly how a woman loves to be spoiled, and he's got about as much selfishness in his whole composition as most men have in their little fingers."

"He certainly spoils you," observed Patricia, smiling. "I remember that was one of the first things I heard about

you when I came to Strangways—that you had a delightful brother who spoiled you horribly.”

Peggy gathered up her belongings preparatory to departure.

“Well, some day some woman will probably have cause to be eternally grateful to my demanding nature,” she returned oracularly. Adding mentally, as she kissed Patricia good-bye: “And I hope that woman will be you, my dear!”

The recollection of Mark’s face as he had sat playing to Patricia in the waning afternoon at Anton Roy was very often with her. Intensely reserved, he had never given her the slightest clue to his feelings, but with the intuition of a woman who loves she had divined them. That the months passed on without anything definite transpiring puzzled her considerably, though it had not shaken her belief that Patricia was the woman Mark cared for. Moreover, she was convinced they would be happy together. They had many tastes in common, and from the point of view of Peggy, the looker-on, they seemed pre-eminently suited to each other. Both of them had been bred to a life of which everything that money can procure was automatically a part—all the smoothnesses and detailed perfection of daily life, all the fineness and fullness of interests. And since, in the natural course of events, Peggy realized that she would some day almost certainly have to surrender her brother to another woman, she would far rather capitulate to Patricia, for whom she had grown to care very deeply, than to anyone else.

The progress of affairs seemed irritatingly slow to her, but with her usual common sense she refrained from interference, only putting in a word on Mark’s behalf whenever it could be done easily and naturally. She herself, if she had been a man in love, would have stormed the citadel in a whirlwind rush—and perhaps failed of achievement owing to her very impetuosity.

But Mark Strown was cast in an altogether different

mould from his sister. On that very first day, when Patricia had been flung from her horse almost into his arms, as it were, he had recognized, with an odd, philosophical yielding to fate, that he had met the one woman who might come to count supremely in his life, and before the end of her stay at Anton Roy that swift premonition had fulfilled itself. But he was curiously perceptive, and he realized that although Patricia meant everything in the world to him, he himself counted with her no more than any other man. She had given him friendship, but he was intuitively conscious that she had given him nothing more. And quietly, with the humility and understanding of the real lover, he had set himself to win that infinitely precious something more—to reach her by the pathway of friendship.

As for Patricia, she had at first been a little perturbed lest he were going to ask of her more than she could give, but after her return to Strangways, his steady comradeship, undemanding and effortless as it appeared, reassured her completely, and gradually she grew to lean upon it and to accept it as one of the good things that had come into her life.

But what Mark Strown neither knew nor guessed was that she had already bestowed all she had to give upon a man whose unyielding pride refused to take the gift.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WAY OF THE WYNSBOROUGHs

LORD MARCHDALE was seated by a brightly burning fire in the South Room, his hand clenched on the amber head of his walking-stick, an ominous frown drawing his heavy brows together so that they almost met above his eagle nose. Opposite him, and looking not unlike a culprit at the bar, stood Kit, his face rather pale, his blue eyes defiant.

"Shut the door," commanded his uncle brusquely. "We don't want half a dozen gaping servants outside, listening to everything we say."

Kit closed the door dutifully and turned round again with an interrogative:

"Well, sir?"

"Well, sir'!" It was almost a snarl. "It's anything but well—let me tell you that! I want an explanation, a deuced clear explanation, too. And I mean to have it."

He paused, and Kit inquired coolly:

"An explanation of what?"

The veined old hand closed a shade more tightly over the amber-headed stick. It was evident that to some extent his lordship was endeavouring to restrain himself and that Kit's apparent nonchalance tested that restraint severely.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, you young cub. You needn't pretend you don't," he answered, scowling.

"I should know better if you told me," retorted Kit.

"Then, if you will have it, what d'you mean—what d'you mean"—his voice rising angrily—"what d'you mean by kissing Miss Waybrant in the passage outside the sun-

parlour half an hour ago? You needn't deny it, because I saw you myself."

"I wasn't going to deny it——"

"Not going to?" stormed Lord Marchdale. "The devil you weren't! Proud of it, I suppose, are you? Think it's 'the thing to do'?"—with withering sarcasm. "Well, let me tell you, I'll have no fooling of that kind here at Strangeways. It you want to sow your wild oats, go to London and do it decently, like a gentleman. But no getting tangled up with village girls. Do you hear?"

"Village girls?" Kit's temper exploded. "You forget yourself, sir! You're speaking of the Rector's daughter, and——"

"'Rector's daughter' be hanged! She's flesh and blood, like other women, I suppose? And ready enough to set her cap at the future Lord Marchdale with precious little encouragement, I've no doubt. So no fooling about with her." He turned away. "That's all I have to say. You can go. Go, I say."

But Kit made no movement to obey. Instead, he stood his ground, facing his uncle with his handsome young head well up and his blue eyes unflinching.

"No," he flung back. "It's not all. You'd better understand, sir, once and for all, that I wasn't 'fooling about.' I didn't intend to tell you at present, but since you've seen us together you may as well know first as last. I've asked Nancy Waybrant to be my wife."

"You've *what*?" Leaning heavily on his stick, the old Earl got to his feet. "You've *what*?"

"I've asked Nancy to be my wife," repeated Kit steadily. Lord Marchdale laughed unpleasantly.

"Then the sooner you tell her you've made a mistake the better. And the sooner she realizes *she's* made a mistake the better. No doubt she thought she was doing a very fine thing for herself, designing young hussy——"

"Stop!" The word blazed from Kit's lips. His face

was suddenly white—a man's face, no longer a boy's. "I won't hear one word—*one word*—against her. You shan't speak of her like that——"

"I shan't do this, and you won't have that!" Marchdale was almost incoherent with fury. The veins started out like cords on his forehead and his eyes glared ferociously. He banged his stick violently on the floor till it seemed in imminent danger of snapping in two under his hand. "Who are you to dictate to me how I shall speak, I'd like to know? What the devil do you mean by it? I repeat"—emphasizing his words with crescendo thuds of the walking-stick—"I repeat, the girl's a designing hussy, trying to hook you for your title and position, and the sooner she understands that, however many kinds of a fool you may be, I'm not so easily hoodwinked, the better! Now, then, what have you to say?"

With a tremendous effort Kit mastered the consuming rage which shook him from head to foot. If Marchdale had been a younger man he would have knocked him down, uncle or no uncle. He thrust his clenched hands into his pockets and kept them there by sheer force of will. The remembrance of Patricia's appealing young wisdom influenced him even through the burning anger which flamed along his veins. For Nancy's sake he would still try to temporize.

"Now what have you to say?" sneered the Earl.

"Just this, sir—that Nancy is the woman I love——"

"Love! *Pah!* Love's one thing—marriage quite another. Love her as much as you like, if you must be such a fool—and then let her take a husband in her own station of life. I'll give her a——"

But he never finished that sentence. With a strangled ejaculation like the sound of an enraged animal, Kit sprang forward, his face convulsed.

"By God, you shan't speak like that of the woman who is going to be my wife!" he shouted. His arm swung up, ready to strike, and in the same moment Lord Marchdale,

startled, dropped his stick, which clattered noisily to the ground, and stepped sharply back, flinging out his hands to avoid the threatened blow.

But the blow never fell. For a fraction of time the two men stood glaring at each other—the young blue eyes ablaze with the righteous anger of a Sir Galahad, the steel-grey old ones flaming with sheer, uncontrollable fury. Then the fire died slowly out of Kit's eyes, replaced by a dawning horror of the act which he had so nearly committed. His face sobered, and he threw his arm swiftly round the old man's shoulders, supporting him.

"I nearly struck you! I'm sorry, sir," he said with frank penitence. "I can't say how sorry. But you goaded me——"

Whatever his faults, Marchdale was at least a good sportsman. At the back of his haughty, domineering mind he knew that he had tried Kit—tried any man in love—beyond what he could be expected to endure.

"Perhaps I went too far," he acknowledged gruffly. "Say no more about it, boy. And pick up my stick."

Kit obeyed, and as he handed it back his glance searched the other's face questioningly. How much ground was covered by the armistice? A glint of humour flickered momentarily in Marchdale's eyes.

"That only settles the matter of your thinking of exercising the right to strike," he observed curtly. The glint died out. "The question of your marrying remains as before. Let Miss Waybrant marry someone in her own sphere. She's not fitted for yours."

"She's a gentlewoman. No one can be more. And if there's any inequality between us, the balance is the other way. I'm not half good enough for her."

"Not good enough for her! God bless my soul, what next?" Lord Marchdale was so overwhelmingly astonished that for a moment he could hardly credit his own ears. "A Wynsborough not good enough for a parson's brat? Not

good enough?" His temper was rising rapidly again. "Let me hear no more of such infernal nonsense! Tell the girl you've made a confounded ass of yourself and finish with it."

"No." Kit spoke quietly, but there was a note of steel in his voice, and his uncle, hearing it, glanced at him sharply.

"Do you mean to defy me?" he thundered.

"I hope you won't make that necessary. But I do mean to marry Nancy Waybrant—either with or without your permission."

"That you'll never have!" roared the Earl. "And if you marry without my consent, I'll disinherit you of every penny it's in my power to do. Moreover, you'll never set foot in Strangways again until I'm dead and buried."

Kit received this information in silence.

"Well?" barked his uncle. "Well?"

"I don't think you really mean that," said Kit conciliatingly. "At least"—with a quick smile—"I hope you don't, sir."

There was something in that quick, disarming smile which brought out strikingly for the moment the resemblance between Kit as he now was and Kerry as he had been ten years ago—that subtle, elusive likeness of which one is sometimes so unexpectedly conscious in two people closely related by blood. Marchdale felt himself suddenly carried back to the time when in this very room, another young, defiant face had met his threats and anger with just that same smile, half-tolerant, half-proud. The memory hurt him, but instead of producing any softening effect it seemed to whip up his anger to a fresh outburst.

"I'll show you whether I mean it or not," he flared. He limped across to the bell and pressed it furiously, keeping his finger on the button till Mitford came hurrying into the room at express speed, looking like a scared rabbit.

"Send Miss Waybrant here—I suppose she's with her ladyship—send her here at once!" snapped Marchdale. Kit

made an impulsive step forward, but the Earl whirled round on him. "You stay where you are! Miss Waybrant can manage to walk here without your assistance. I suppose?"

Kit shrugged his shoulders, and taking up his stand on the hearthrug, folded his arms and awaited Nancy's appearance in rebellious silence. She came within a minute or two, her round, innocent young face looking a trifle anxious and distraught at this unexpected summons to his lordship's sanctum.

"Did you want me?" she asked a little nervously. Her glance went inquiringly from one angry face to the other.

"Yes, we wanted you—I wanted you," said the Earl. "I gather that this young fool"—he pointed with his stick towards Kit—"has given you the impression he proposes to make you his wife."

He paused, but Nancy made no answer. She stood quite still, her soft lips firmly compressed, as though bracing herself for what was to come. There was something appealing about her—about her youth and total absence of defiance, and even Marchdale's irascible tones modified themselves a trifle when next he spoke.

"Such a marriage, however, would never have my sanction, so I shall be glad if, here and now, you will formally release my nephew from whatever entangle—whatever engagement he has made."

Kit gave a sudden jerky movement, then folded his arms more closely and waited. The Earl waited. But still Nancy did not speak. If Marchdale had expected a meek and unqualified assent to his proposition, he appeared destined to disappointment.

"Well?" he said testily. "Well? Why don't you answer?"

Nancy drew a deep breath, as though summoning up her courage.

"Because—I'm not going to release Kit—unless—unless

he wants to be released," she said, speaking very quickly.

"It isn't what he wants—it's what's good for him," returned Lord Marchdale, his anger beginning to master him again. "Do you understand? And I—I—I forbid this marriage. I won't have it! I won't have it! Tell him you don't want to marry him, and be quick about it. Do you hear, girl?"

Nancy's brown eyes met the fierce old grey ones bravely.

"But I do want to marry him," she said candidly. "We love each other."

The simple affirmation, uttered with a shy sweetness of decision, acted like a spark to tinder. The Wynsborough temper—with its arbitrary assumption of the right to rule, its imperious refusal to tolerate the slightest opposition—flamed up again in an outburst of fury that was almost terrifying. Nancy was hardly able to follow all the bitter words the furious old man hurled at them in his merciless anger. Only out of the thunderous storm of threats and denunciation emerged the salient facts that she was dismissed from her post as secretary to Lady Mary, ordered never to set foot within Strangways again, and that if Kit was "damned fool enough" to marry her, he would be disinherited and banished in disgrace from the castle.

"And let me tell you," wound up Lord Marchdale, glowering at Kit, who had crossed the room and taken up his position at Nancy's side, his arm slipped through hers in a reassuring, protective fashion—"let me tell you that disinheritance in this case is no mere form of words. The entail in our family is a very hollow thing and assures you of precious little—about enough to keep the West Wing going!"—with a sneer. "So that if you persist in taking your own way, you'll probably have to let Strangways to some rich grocer, when I'm gone, and live in one of the cottages on the estate yourselves." He transferred his infuriated gaze to Nancy. "As for you, Miss Waybrant, you'll find the Marchdale title without the Marchdale rent-roll a very un-

substantial prize—so you'd better think twice before you snatch at it."

Nancy disengaged herself suddenly from Kit's hold and took a quick step forward.

"I don't care tuppence about the title, or the rent-roll," she said, carried out of herself by a sudden reckless courage. "I'd marry Kit if he were plain Mr. Stubbs, and—and kept the grocer's shop himself!" she wound up defiantly.

A roar like that of an angry lion followed this announcement, and in the midst of the furious tirade of insult and abuse which ensued Kit hurried Nancy out of the room and closed the door behind them.

In the hall they encountered Patricia, who came up to them hastily, reading in their faces that something more untoward than usual had occurred. Nancy, her sudden spurt of defiance exhausted, was half-crying. No one had ever spoken so cruelly or hardly to her before, and she was shaken and unstrung by the hurricane of anger which had beaten round her. But her inner pluck remained unbroken. If it had been necessary to go back that very moment and face Lord Marchdale's uncurbed wrath afresh, she would have done it.

"What on earth has happened?" asked Patricia with manifest concern.

Kit explained in a rapid undertone, not even omitting the fact that his uncle had goaded him almost into striking him.

"Oh, Kit!" An exclamation of horrified dismay broke simultaneously from Nancy and Patricia.

He lifted his head, shame and resentment fighting for mastery in the boyish blue eyes.

"I know," he acknowledged. "It was—pretty ghastly. But that ends it. I'm going to take Nancy away."

"No!" The word came ringingly from Patricia's lips. "No, you're not to do that, Kit—not yet."

"I think the time's come for it, when I can be nearly driven into doing a thing like that," he said with a short, hard laugh. "I tell you, Pat, if he were ever to utter another word of insult concerning Nancy"—his voice vibrated passionately—"I wouldn't be answerable for myself."

"He didn't mean to say it," said Patricia quietly. "He didn't even think it. You know perfectly well that he hardly knows what he's saying or doing when he's in a rage."

"Unfortunately, that pleasant temperament is a family trait," returned Kit dryly. "Uncle Blair hasn't got the monopoly. So—we're going, Nancy and I."

There was a grim determination about him that frightened her. All passion had died out of his voice, and the quietness of his manner disturbed her far more than any exhibition of headlong anger would have done. Kit had reached the end of his tether. It was evident in his set jaw, the steady light in his eyes.

"Nancy?" Patricia addressed her imploringly.

Kit looked down at the girl at his side.

"Are you ready to come with me, Nancy?" he asked, his voice wonderfully gentle.

For a moment Nancy was silent. Her thoughts had flown to the simple Rectory which she had always known as home and where her adored padre was even now awaiting her return. To go with Kit would mean an uprooting—a tearing asunder of all the dearest and tenderest ties of her short life, and—hardest of all to contemplate—the infliction of an inexpressible hurt upon the man who, till the coming of Kit as her lover, had embodied her whole world.

But Kit had come, and, cost what it might, she would never fail him. She slipped her hand into his confidently, and lifted a pair of steady eyes to his face.

"Yes, Kit. I'm ready," she said.

The words stole across the silence unflinchingly. A stifled cry escaped Patricia.

"No, no!" she exclaimed impetuously. "You can't—you mustn't. It will hurt so many lives." Her small, strong hands closed firmly round Kit's arm, gripping it entreatingly. "Wait—wait a little longer—please, Kit. Wait till we've tried every other way. Nancy"—she turned impulsively to the girl beside her—"help me in this. Don't act hastily. Go home, now—and leave me to see what I can do. You don't *want* to run away?"

"No," said Nancy. "I don't *want* to. But what else can we do?"—miserably. "Lord Marchdale will never give us his consent."

"I don't know. He might. At any rate, I'm going in, here and now, to talk to him about it," returned Patricia determinedly.

The other two stared at her in astonishment, and Nancy hastily tried to dissuade her.

"Oh, don't! It would be no good," she urged forlornly. "It would only make him angry with you, too."

"Well, what if it does? Hard words break no bones."

A brief gleam of humour lightened the gravity of Kit's face.

"If they did, Nancy and I would be providing an excellent nucleus for the valley of dry bones by this time," he commented.

Nancy laughed jerkily. The afternoon's scene with Lord Marchdale had worked upon her nerves, and she was almost equally near to tears and laughter. Patricia slipped a reassuring arm round her shoulder.

"You go straight back to the Rectory," she urged. "You're not fit to do anything in the running-away line at the moment, anyway," she pursued with a smile. "So just go home, and leave me to tackle godfather."

"He'll eat you up," observed Kit.

Patricia laughed ruefully.

"Well, at least I shall die in a good cause," she returned. Inwardly she felt considerably relieved. It was clear to

her that she had succeeded in lessening the tension, and that Kit had now cooled down sufficiently to prevent his rushing into some precipitate action from which there could never be any going back.

"Now be good, both of you," she said admonishingly. Dropping a valedictory kiss on Nancy's pale little face, she left them alone together and made her way slowly towards the South Room.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAW OF TYRANNY

REACHING the door of her godfather's room, Patricia involuntarily paused outside. She had no thought of turning back from her self-appointed task, but she was conscious that her pulse was beating more rapidly than its wont. At last she turned the handle and went into the room. Lord Marchdale was standing on the hearthrug, staring down into the fire. In the leaping light of the flames his face looked suddenly aged and very weary, the lines on it more deeply graved than usual, and his eyes held a curious expression—bitterly retrospective, as though his thoughts were with some happening of the past of which the memory still had power to hurt. The proud old head was thrust forward, the shoulders stooped a little, and he leaned heavily upon his stick. Patricia felt a sudden rush of compassion for him.

"Godfather!" she said gently.

He lifted his head and in a moment she realized that no matter what he had suffered, both in the past and in the present, his indomitable pride and fixity of purpose were still unaltered. His fierce old eyes flashed over her, haughty and keen as an eagle's.

"Well?" he demanded curtly.

She closed the door behind her and advanced slowly into the room.

"I came to speak to you—about Kit and Nancy," she said.

A brief ejaculation broke from him, and a spark of anger lit itself in his eyes. For a moment he regarded her in silence.

"The devil you did!" he said at last. "And may I ask"—chillingly—"what good purpose you think will be served by your speaking? Kit knows precisely what I think on the matter—and by this time I imagine Miss Waybrant herself has no illusions."

"No, I should think she hasn't," agreed Patricia with impulsive candour. "You were perfectly detestable to her, godfather."

The Earl raised his shaggy eyebrows. A frank opinion of his conduct was a privilege not usually accorded him.

"She shouldn't have tried to trap the boy into marrying her, then," he retorted.

"She didn't. Nancy isn't in the least that sort of girl," said Patricia warmly. "She's in love with Kit and he with her. So why in the world shouldn't they marry and be happy?"

He turned on her stormily.

"Because I don't choose that they should marry," he thundered, and his manner implied that that settled the matter indisputably.

But Patricia declined to be intimidated.

"Why not?" she persisted. "Why shouldn't they marry?"

He wheeled round, glaring at her in angry astonishment.

"I'm not bound to give my reasons, am I?" he snapped.

"Yes," she answered daringly. "I think you are."

For a moment he was silent in sheer amazement. Then:

"How dare you? How d-dare you?" he broke out furiously, almost stuttering with anger. "You—you to tell me that I must 'give my reasons'!"

"You asked me," put in Patricia swiftly, and her eyes met and held his bravely.

He paused.

"True," he admitted at last. "So I did. Well, then, I don't agree with you. I don't consider myself bound to give my reasons for everything. I give my orders. That's sufficient."

Patricia clasped her hands.

"No, it isn't. It *isn't*, nowadays," she said earnestly. "Oh, godfather, do listen to me—do try to understand. The days when parents and guardians just fired off commands at people and expected them to be obeyed without question have gone by. We want to know why, now—the reason for things. It isn't that we're rebellious. It's that we've learned to use our own minds—to think—and we shall none of us ever again be satisfied to obey blindly. Kit isn't a fool. Surely you wouldn't want him to obey you blindly—in the dark—like a child?"

"I'm the head of this house——" began the Earl.

"I know you are. And just because of that you ought to be able to give a reason for all your orders."

She paused breathlessly. She was surprised that he had allowed her to continue for so long without silencing her. And, perhaps, but for the fact that in that slender figure standing all aglow and vital in front of him, Marchdale saw again the figure of the Barbara he had loved in years gone by, he would not have allowed it. As it was, he seemed even to give a certain amount of consideration to Patricia's impassioned young pleading.

"Then, if you want my reasons—I don't choose that Kit shall marry out of his own station in life."

"Oh, what does station matter? It's happiness that counts!"

The Earl winced. He had known what it was to have wealth and luxury and power all his life, but little enough of happiness.

"Kit has his duty to the family," he maintained. "And his duty is to marry suitably and carry on the line."

"Well, he couldn't marry anyone sweeter and dearer than Nancy," she insisted.

"I've nothing against the girl's character"—impatiently. "She's merely not suitable in point of position. And Kit shall never marry her with my permission."

"Then he'll marry her without!" exclaimed Patricia impulsively.

Marchdale's face hardened.

"If he does, he'll have to quit Strangways. He shan't bring that parson's brat here as his wife—not while I'm alive!"

All the inherent stubbornness and arrogance of the Wynsboroughs rang in his voice. And Kit was a Wynsborough, too! It was the self-same nature, warring against its kind—the same imperious pride pitted against imperious pride as had sent Kerry into exile ten years ago. A minute or two elapsed before Patricia answered. Then she spoke slowly, pausing between her words.

"Don't you think—it's rather horrible—to feel that people are waiting for you to die—so that they can be happy?"

Marchdale gave an involuntary start.

"What the—— What do you mean?" he demanded fiercely.

"I mean just that," she replied steadily. "You've said Kit shan't marry Nancy while you're alive—or, at least, that he shall be ostracized if he does. What can he do? What are you yourself implying that he is to do—*except* wait until you're dead?"

Never before had the inevitable consequence of a family despotism been put before the old Earl—so clearly and with such irrefutable logic. And uttered in that fresh girlish voice, with those candid eyes lifted to his, the crystal truth of it was overwhelming. There was neither bitterness nor unkindness in the speech, only a young, clearsighted sincerity that went straight to the heart of things.

A long silence followed. Several times Marchdale moved restlessly, tugging at his heavy white moustache.

"You hit straight from the shoulder, Pat," he said at last.

Beneath the surface hardness of the curt speech Patricia could hear an oddly hurt note in the harsh old voice.

"Godfather!" She ran to him and slipped her arm into

his. "Godfather, I hated saying it! But you made me. I wanted you to understand, so much. Don't you see, it's happened like this before. You've made so many people unhappy—without meaning to. There's been the Dresden China Lady—because you wouldn't let her marry her doctor-man, and Kerry"—she felt his arm jerk suddenly under hers, but she rushed on impetuously. "And now you're going to do it all over again and make Kit and Nancy—two more people—miserable. Oh, you mustn't—you mustn't!"

The Earl stood rigid, his face slowly greying. The name of Kerry—the once-loved name that had not crossed his lips for years—flung at him thus without warning, had been like a sword-thrust in his heart. Slowly he disengaged himself from Patricia's clasp.

"At least," he said, his mouth twisted wryly, "I've never made you unhappy."

For a moment she stood silent, her arms hanging loosely at her sides, her dark head bent. Then she raised her face to his.

"Yes, you have," she said slowly and painfully. "When you ruined Kerry's life, you ruined mine, too."

The next moment she felt his hands on her shoulders, gripping them so hard that she winced under the pressure of his fingers. His eyes—those grey, deep-set eyes so terribly like Kerry's own—searched her face with desperate intensity.

"What do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely. "What has Kerry to do with you?"

Brokenly, in a few words she told him—of her father's friendship for Lorimer and her own meeting with him, of their love and of how they had parted in the Forest.

"He's been *here*—here in the Forest!" muttered Marchdale incredulously. His voice shook uncontrollably.

"Yes."

It was hardly more than a whisper. The whole agony

of her loss was upon her. For a few moments they peered at one another—the old, tortured face and the young, heart-broken one, seeing each other through a mist of pain. Then Marchdale took his hands from her shoulders and, moving across to the window, stared out of it in utter silence. Outside, the wind came in gusts, snatching the withering leaves from the trees and whirling them before it. The skies were leaden. The dreariness of the dying year lay all around.

Patricia never knew quite how long the silence lasted. But at last, after what seemed an interminable length of time, dully weighted down with pain, Lord Marchdale turned to her again.

“There was no other way,” he said heavily. “Kerry had to go.”

“What did he—of what was he accused?” she asked.

He pointed to a chair.

“Sit down,” he said briefly. “You’ve proved your right to know the truth. Afterwards—after I’ve told you why Kerry had to go away—we will never speak of this again.”

She seated herself mechanically, while Marchdale leaned his arm on the chimney-piece, shading his face with his hand. Presently he began to speak, in a hard, difficult voice, as though forcing himself to the performance of a duty from which his very soul recoiled.

As Patricia listened, it seemed to her as though she could visualize all those scenes of the past through which he took her. She could see Kerry, gay and reckless, loving cards and racing and amusement, letting money slip through his fingers with the heedlessness of youth—Kerry, idolized, spoilt by pretty women, generous and extravagant to the last degree. Then the beginning of trouble betwixt him and his uncle. Debts, which the Earl paid time after time. Then further debts, followed by reprimands and warnings. Later, Lord Marchdale’s edict that he would pay no more—that Kerry must keep within his allowance. Last of all, a demand which could not be ignored for the immediate repay-

ment of a loan, followed by an appeal from Kerry to his uncle for at least an advance of his next half-year's allowance, and a peremptory refusal from the old man in return. Then, within a few days, Kerry's exigent creditor suddenly and mysteriously paid—and, at the same time, fifty pounds stolen from the drawer where a certain amount of loose money was customarily kept for the purpose of cash payments, such as wages.

After that, matters had rushed swiftly to a climax. Suspicion pointed with a terrible conclusiveness to Kerry, and Marchdale had sent for him and questioned him as to where he had found the money to liquidate his debt. He had no explanation to give. Instead, he had stood, white-faced and stubbornly silent, until at last, forced by the remorseless logic of facts, the Earl had point-blank accused him of the theft.

The control Patricia had been exercising throughout her godfather's brief narrative snapped suddenly. She sprang to her feet with a cry.

"Do you mean to say you believed Kerry guilty of theft?" she exclaimed. "Of theft! I never heard of anything so ridiculous! So—so funny!" She broke off on a sobbing breath half-way between tears and wild laughter.

"There was no alternative but to believe it," replied Marchdale harshly. "The money—two hundred pounds in gold—was brought from the bank by Mathers during the morning and placed in the drawer where we always kept it. Kerry happened to be in the room at the time, and old Mathers being called away for a few moments he was left alone there, with the drawer unlocked. Afterwards Mathers came back and locked it as usual. I used to carry a second key to the drawer, and having need of some cash on the following day, *I* was the person who discovered the theft."

"But because you discovered the loss, it doesn't prove that Kerry took the money," protested Patricia.

"No one else had had the opportunity," he returned remorselessly. "He had. And how else, within twenty-four hours, could he have found the money to pay his debts?"

"How did you know that he had paid the money he owed?" she asked swiftly.

"I took steps to find out. Inquiry proved that Kerry had paid fifty pounds—in *gold*—into the bank on the very day Mathers had put the two hundred into the drawer. He had paid it in just before the bank's closing hour, and had then drawn a cheque for that amount to the man in whose debt he stood. And he was unable to account for his possession of such a sum of money."

Patricia stood clenching and unclenching her hands. Her slight young breast heaved tumultuously.

"I don't believe it!" she said at last in low, passionate tones, just as she had once said to Lady Mary. "Nothing will ever make me believe that Kerry—*stole!* Why—why"—laughing a little hysterically—"it's absurd. Kerry just couldn't do anything lowdown like that."

"He couldn't deny it," said Marchdale relentlessly.

"He did deny it—to me."

"To you? Very likely. In the circumstances, a mere denial—without proof—is hardly convincing." He spoke with bitter contempt.

"But——"

"Say no more." The old Earl's voice cracked suddenly. He had stood as much as he could bear. In her own trouble and dismay Patricia had hardly realized what that bitter unveiling of the wound which festered continually at the root of the Wynsborough pride had cost him. Yet it had been typical of his stern sense of duty that, having once recognized her peculiar right to know the truth, he had forced himself through the torment of telling her.

"Say no more. You know now why Kerry is not for you—nor any woman. Least of all for you—Barbara's

child. My dear," he added with a sudden flash of unwonted tenderness, "I'm sorry——"

She caught his hand. It felt chill beneath her warm young fingers, and her heart gave a great leap of pity as she looked up into his haggard face.

"I'm sorry, too," she said simply. "But not like you are, godfather. You see, I don't believe it. I *can't*." Her eyes shone like stars. "Nothing will shake my belief in Kerry. I trust him—absolutely!"

CHAPTER XXIII

SEVERAL POINTS OF VIEW

WHEN Patricia left her godfather, she went straight upstairs and shut herself up in her own sitting-room. She must be alone to think. Drawing a chair to the fire, she surrendered herself to the thoughts that crowded in upon her.

Kerry a thief! She dismissed the idea as utterly absurd. For her, with her knowledge of the man, the suggestion was too ludicrous for a moment's credence. Now that she knew the kind of accusation which had driven him forth into the desert places of the world, the denial of his guilt which he had given her in the Forest was needless. She wanted no denial from him to convince her that he was innocent of such a charge.

A tempest of loyal anger and resentment surged up within her at the mere thought of the insult done to him. It was inconceivable to her that the Earl and Lady Mary could have so easily believed him guilty. And yet—she strove to be fair, to look at the matter as it must have appeared to them—the circumstantial evidence had been overwhelmingly against him, and he had not been able to bring—or, in any case, had not brought—a single jot or tittle of evidence to bear in his favour. Beyond that, she recognized that the Kerry they had known, the Kerry of ten years ago—impulsive, headstrong, “reckless and careless of others,” as Lady Mary had described him—must have been very different from the stern, silent man she herself had learned to know—disciplined by years of loneliness and self-repression, hard and embittered, it might be, but yet wholly to be trusted,

and one who carried his life lightly enough in his hand if that life could serve either friend or motherland.

If only Marchdale could have known the Kerry she had known!

Gradually, softening her resentment as she pondered on the matter, came a deep compassion for the proud old man. She began to realize a little of what it must have meant to him all these years to believe that one of his own blood had been guilty of the common, sordid act of theft. It must have dealt him a bitter blow to think that the long, clean line of Wynsborough had been smirched by a deed of the meanest sort of dishonour. And that the deed should have been committed by the boy whom he had almost worshipped, who had been all that was left to him of Lynette, had intensified his suffering a thousandfold. Far more easily could he have found forgiveness for Kit in like circumstances—because, where the latter was concerned, he cared so infinitely less. And, although the whole matter had been carefully hushed up and concealed so that the world at large was in utter ignorance of it, still, the Earl knew, and the knowledge had eaten into his heart like iron.

Patricia's thoughts swung back to Kerry and his side of the question. She could only faintly imagine what it must have signified to him to be so accused—to have a mean and sordid crime of such a nature fastened on to him and know that those he loved could believe him capable of such a thing. Her heart ached for the boyish honour suddenly torn from him and dragged in the gutter, for the young, sensitive pride crucified and writhing under the unbearable torment of it. It was no longer a matter for any wonderment that he had grown into a harsh, embittered man, at cross purposes with the world. The only wonder was that he had not made total shipwreck of what remained of life. Instead, he had put up a fight, and, though scarred and battered, had yet made of his maimed and broken existence something worth having—something that when the good and evil which

we do comes to be reckoned up would very surely tilt the balance in his favour.

The pity of it all! Patricia felt her throat contract, and slow, burning tears welled into her eyes and fell unheeded on the hands that lay loosely folded on her knee. If she could only have comforted him—with her love sweetened the life which, alone, he had found the courage to face! But he had refused her gift, thrust it back into her arms. Always there would stand between them, like an impassable wall, that arrogant pride of his which would only accept her love on level terms.

The minutes dragged by unnoticed while she sat peering desolately into the future. Presently the clock on the stairs struck the hour, startling her momentarily back into the consciousness of time. She sat up, listening intently. She had no idea how long she had been sitting there in the firelit dusk. Six measured strokes smote on her ear. Six o'clock! She would not need to begin dressing for dinner for an hour yet, and with a sigh of mingled weariness and relief she sank back into her chair and relapsed once more into her thoughts.

Soon afterwards there came a light tap at the door of her room and Lady Mary's voice sounded from outside. It seemed to hold a note of appeal even through the wooden panelling.

"May I come in, Pat?"

Patricia sprang up, hastily brushing her hand across her eyes to remove any lingering trace of tears. Then she crossed the room and threw open the door.

"Why, yes, dear Dresden China Lady. Come in and sit down in this comfy chair. You look so tired," she added commiseratingly.

Lady Mary suffered herself to be established in a cosy chair by the fire. Her pretty old face wore a look of anxiety and her eyes were wistful.

"I wanted to talk to you, my dear," she said. "I'm so

distressed about Kit and Nancy—Kit has told me everything—and I can hardly believe Blair really means that Nancy is not to come here again. You've been talking to him, haven't you? Was it—did it do any good?"

Patricia shook her head.

"Not at the moment, anyway," she admitted.

Lady Mary clasped her hands tightly together.

"I was afraid not," she murmured sadly. "Blair is so—so firm once he has taken a decision."

"Obstinate, I call it," replied Patricia, slipping to her knees on the hearthrug and poking the fire energetically to relieve her feelings.

"He doesn't understand," said Lady Mary, sighing. "He has always been used to ordering all our lives for us, and now he wants, of course, to order Kit's."

Patricia laid her hand over the small clasped ones. Her eyes were very soft.

"Why did you let him order yours—years ago?" she said gently. "Oh, Dresden China Lady, why didn't you just marry your doctor-man in spite of him?"

A pink flush flew up into Lady Mary's cheeks, bringing back a sudden look of girlhood to her face.

"My dear, I was so young. I didn't dare to disobey him. Sometimes now I wish—I wonder——" She broke off. Then, unclasping her hands, she took Patricia's hand between them and held it closely. "He was the only man I ever loved," she said.

"You poor darling!" Impulsively Patricia flung her arms round the slender, upright little figure, and for a few moments the Dresden China Lady let her head rest quietly against the girl's warm young breast, whilst Patricia bent over her, stroking the soft grey hair and crooning tender words of endearment. At last Lady Mary lifted her head once more, and the firelight gleamed on the tears that stood in her eyes—the sad, difficult tears of remembrance.

"And now, I am terribly afraid for Kit," she said, brush-

ing them swiftly away. "He will never bear it—his uncle's opposition. He's a Wyncsborough, too, you see"—with a wan smile. "He has the same strong will as Blair himself."

"Perhaps," replied Patricia slowly, "when godfather thinks over all I told him, he will reconsider things."

"All you told him? What did you tell him, Pat?"

"I told him," returned Patricia grimly, "of all the lives he has spoiled with his beastly pride and temper—yours, and Kerry's, and mine. And I begged him not to ruin Kit's and Nancy's as well."

But Lady Mary hardly heeded the latter part of the speech. She caught at Patricia's hand convulsively.

"You mentioned Kerry to him? How—how did he take it?"

"He told me—everything."

"He—told—you?" repeated Lady Mary slowly and incredulously. "Blair told you? But he will never speak of it! Why did he tell you? And how can he have spoilt—your life?"

Patricia's blue eyes looked straight into the faded lavender ones.

"Because," she said softly, "Kerry is the man I love."

Lady Mary uttered a cry, then remained silent for a long while, gazing into the heart of the fire. At last she turned back again to the girl beside her, a curious commingling of emotion on her face, her eyes very wistful.

"Oh, my dear," she said brokenly, an exceeding bitterness and grief in her tones. "There is no one in the world I would have loved more dearly to be Kerry's wife—if only he had been worthy of you!"

"But he refuses to marry me."

"*He* refuses to marry *you*!" exclaimed Lady Mary. "I don't understand. Surely you wouldn't—you're not willing to marry a—thief?" Her voice shook uncontrollably on the last word.

"I'm quite willing to marry Kerry. Because, you see, I

don't believe he is—what you say. I shall never believe it"—proudly.

Lady Mary fell silent again. At last she said heavily:

"I wish I had your faith. But—Oh! There was no question but that he did it! . . . And you say he refuses to marry you?" she went on after a pause, wonderingly.

Patricia bent her head.

"Yes. He will never marry any woman—with that stain on his name."

Lady Mary's eyes glowed.

"I'm glad," she said with a low, breathless eagerness. "I'm glad he has so much honour left. He is quite right," she went on more firmly. "He cannot marry—he ought not to."

For a few moments the two women sat quietly, the thoughts of each dwelling with a strange, divergent sorrow on the man who had counted for so much in both their lives. Presently the distant booming of a gong came to disturb their musings. Lady Mary sprang nervously to her feet.

"There goes the dressing-gong. I must run away, dear. We had better be very punctual to-night as—as Blair has been so much upset to-day."

A fugitive smile twitched the corners of Patricia's lips. She quite recognized that Marchdale's temper was likely to be under rather precarious control after the events of the afternoon. It was odd to reflect that, no matter what big tragedy had enveloped you, the trifling irritations of daily life yet thrust their all-pervasive pin-pricks into the midst of it.

As anticipated, dinner that night proved to be somewhat of an ordeal. Patricia looked very tired, and there were dark shadows underneath her eyes. But her sense of humour would never quite desert her, no matter what she suffered, and as the nerve-racking meal progressed she reflected, with a faint amusement, that it was rather like sitting on the edge of a volcano which might, or might not, indulge in a fiery

upheaval at any moment. Marchdale's only contribution to the conversation was an occasional rasping, staccato sentence that bore witness to the tension under which he was labouring. Lady Mary looked like a little white saint, forlornly on the verge of tears, while Kit, his face like a thundercloud, preserved an impenetrable silence unless specifically addressed.

Oppressive as it was, Patricia could have prayed for the prolongation of the meal. The shadow of past tragedies which lay upon the faces of the old Earl and his sister strengthened her intense desire to save them from any further grief, and she felt convinced that another long battle with Kit awaited her, when she should have reported the fruitlessness of her afternoon's errand to the South Room, if she were to prevent him from carrying out his intention of marrying Nancy out of hand, in defiance of his uncle's prohibition.

But before the end of dinner a totally unexpected happening deflected the thoughts of every one present from personal matters. A low-toned colloquy took place at the door between one of the footmen and an unseen maid-servant, the footman spoke a few words to Mitford, and the latter, approaching Lady Mary, apologetically informed her that Jonathan Mathers had been found in a dead faint in the library. It appeared that his dinner had been taken to his private sitting-room as usual, and that, as he failed to put in an appearance, the maid deputed to wait upon him had gone in search of him and discovered him lying unconscious on the library floor.

"What's that? What's wrong?" demanded the Earl testily, as Lady Mary gave vent to a little cry of dismay.

"Jonathan—he's ill," she explained in distress.

Mathers was regarded so much as a friend that any illness of his claimed almost as much attention as would the illness of a member of the family, and the meal was brought to an abrupt conclusion. The old man had seemed ailing for a day or two, but no one had attached any particular impor-

tance to the matter, suspecting nothing more serious than a cold. Now, however, this sudden fainting attack roused their apprehensions, and he was forthwith carried up to his room while a hasty telephone message summoned the doctor.

By the time Dr. Beresford reached the castle Mathers was conscious once more, but he seemed to wander a little in his mind, not always recognizing who it was who spoke to him unless it chanced to be Lady Mary, and at the sound of her voice the light of recognition invariably returned to his eyes.

"Influenza," was Beresford's verdict, upon which Marchdale snorted and commented acidly that "that was always a safe diagnosis—it covered a multitude of errors."

But during the days that followed small dissensions and acerbities fell into their proper place. Mathers was seriously ill, it appeared, and it would need constant nursing and every aid that medical science could give if he were to be pulled back to life again. His age was against him, and his heart, never very strong, seemed to be weakening dangerously.

A deep gloom settled down over the castle. The doctor came and went twice a day, his face growing graver with each visit, nurses were installed, and Lady Mary herself spent hours in the sick-room, watching over the old man whom she had known and loved since her earliest childhood. Lord Marchdale was manifestly overwhelmed with anxiety. Mathers had been to him far more than a mere general factotum. There was no secret in the Earl's life, no detail of the administration of his affairs, no sorrow that had befallen him—even the shame of Kerry's guilt—which Jonathan had not known and to which he had not brought a devoted sympathy and, often enough, wise counsel.

Temporarily, the old man's unexpected illness lightened the burden on Patricia's shoulders, since Kit, thoroughly distressed and anxious, had readily agreed that the present was no time either for further argument with his uncle or

for taking the law into his own hands, and for the moment the whole question of his marriage was allowed to drop. At Patricia's suggestion, Nancy had even refrained from telling her father the real reason for her absence from Strangways, simply letting him assume that it was in consequence of Mather's illness.

"There is no possible object in worrying the padre before we need," Patricia had said, a little anxious line wrinkling her brows. "He has enough worries without that. Perhaps, afterwards, we may persuade godfather to see reason. If not——"

"If not, Kit and I will go away together and get married," Nancy had answered quietly.

There had been something very steadfast in the upturned childish face, and Patricia, glancing down at it, realized with a little shock that Nancy, for all her youth, was yet woman enough to follow the man she loved, even though it might mean treading a hard and difficult path.

And so, for the time being, matters rested, while the grey Angel of Death stood on the threshold of the castle, waiting . . . waiting until God should either call him back for a little space or bid him enter.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN STRANWOOD CHURCH

“IT seems so—so heartless to go,” declared Patricia. “One doesn’t feel like decorating.”

Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since Jonathan Mathers had been taken ill, and although the fever and high temperature had abated he still hovered between life and death. “He’ll slip through our fingers from sheer weakness and exhaustion if we’re not careful,” declared Beresford. So that now, when the Harvest Festival had fallen due, for which occasion Kit and Patricia had long ago promised their services as helpers over the church decorations, they were both hesitating as to what to do in the matter. It was Lady Mary’s gentle wisdom that finally solved the question.

“I think you should go,” she said quietly. “Your going can neither help nor hinder Jonathan, and a promise is a promise. After all, even if”—her voice shook a little—“if Jonathan should die, it is no reason why we shouldn’t give thanks to God for the harvest.”

So it was settled they should go, and half an hour later they drove down together to Stranwood church, Kit at the wheel and the back seat of the car heaped high with fruit and flowers. Outside the church they discovered Peggy and her brother, who had driven in for the same purpose, conversing with the Rector. Peggy hailed them joyfully as they descended from their car.

“I’m so glad you’ve come! We were afraid you might not be able to, and then the padre would have got all the work out of Mark and me. He’s a perfect slave-driver, you know,” she went on gaily, tucking her arm into Patricia’s, “when it comes to church decorating. You’ve never been here for any

of the festivals before. I have—and every Christmas and Easter and Harvest time I go home with blistered hands and an aching back.”

The Rector smiled affectionately into the merry, provocative face. There were many people who regarded Mrs. Bethune as merely a charming and rather superficial society woman, but Bernard Waybrant knew better. He was gifted with a full measure of that insight which penetrates below the surface, and he was very well aware of the genuine kind-heartedness which lay beneath Peggy’s insouciant manner.

“I hope your coming here means that Jonathan Mathers is better?” he said to Patricia as they all turned and walked up the church path together.

She shook her head.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t,” she answered sadly. “But Lady Mary thought we could be of use here, and we can’t really do anything much to help at the castle. The doctor and nurses are doing all that is possible, and Lady Mary scarcely leaves the sick-room.”

Waybrant nodded understandingly.

“Jonathan has been a big link in the life at Strangways,” he said. “It will be a very deep grief to your godfather and his sister if he shouldn’t recover.”

Nancy, enveloped in a serviceable overall, a sheaf of golden corn in her arms, greeted them at the church door. A rosy flush suffused her youthful face as she encountered Kit’s devouring gaze. They had had to subsist on a very occasional surreptitious meeting during the last fortnight—a penurious diet for young lovers—and each was hungry for the sight of the other.

“Give that to me,” said Kit peremptorily, taking the sheaf from her arms. “Now, where is it wanted?”

They went off happily, side by side, and later on were to be seen busily engaged in decorating the reading-desk together, while every one else tactfully found work to do elsewhere. There were several willing helpers who had come

in from the village, and by common consent Peggy took command of affairs and had soon set everybody to work. The Rector himself worked like a Trojan, and, whether by Peggy's manœuvring or not, Patricia found that she and Mark Strown had become jointly responsible for the decoration of the pulpit. A halt was called at lunch time, when the village helpers went home, and a picnic meal of sandwiches and hot coffee, provided by Peggy's forethought, took place in the schoolroom.

After lunch they continued their efforts unflaggingly till dusk began to steal into the dim corners of the church, and the light of the westering sun, slanting through the rich-hued windows, lay like handfuls of crimson and gold and purple jewels on the floor.

"We shall have to stop now," announced Peggy. "I think"—casting an appraising eye over the scene of their labours—"we shall be able to finish to-morrow morning. And now," she added cheerfully, "I'm going to carry you all off to tea at Anton Roy. You'll come, padre dear, won't you?"

Waybrant smiled.

"I don't suppose, if it's a part of Mrs. Bethune's programme, that it would be the slightest good my refusing, even if I wanted to—which I don't," he returned.

Peggy made a small, impertinent grimace.

"Not the slightest. Even a solemn meeting of churchwardens would have had to go by the board! Kit, you've room for four in your car—we've only brought our two-seater. Will you drive Nancy and the padre and me, and Mark can bring Patricia?"

"Right you are," agreed Kit. And very soon, under Peggy's skilful generalship, the first car slipped away, she and the Rector occupying the back seat while, in front, Nancy's radiant face smiled happily somewhere about the level of Kit's shoulder.

Strown and Patricia, who had remained behind for a few

minutes to supervise the clearing away of any *débris*, turned back into the church as the merry party drove off. Already the grey film of approaching twilight had begun to veil the pillared arches, blurring them to a tender indistinctness, while here and there, shifting slowly as the sun sank lower, the jewelled patches of colour flung back by the ancient glass glowed lambently against the grey. On the altar, the long candles rose white and ghostlike, while now and again a fitful gleam of light picked out the steely glimmer of the organ pipes, ranked together in tall phalanx.

"I wish you could play to me," said Patricia impulsively. Mark had played to her several times on a small, sweet-toned organ which he had had installed in the hall at Anton Roy, and he was almost as much a master of the instrument as he was of the pianoforte.

"If there were anyone to blow——" he began uncertainly. And then his eyes fell on a small urchin who had been making himself useful during the afternoon and who was now occupied in tidying up the fallen scraps of leaf and twig. "Isn't that Tommy Briggs?" he said. "He'll blow. He's done it for me before."

Patricia slipped into a pew, and presently the beautiful tones of the organ throbbed through the little church. She sat listening quietly, soothed and calmed by the music. She was feeling very tired and sick at heart. Her own private troubles and the sadness and anxiety which had brooded over the castle since the beginning of Jonathan's illness had weighed upon her heavily. But gradually, as the harmonies rose and fell around her, she became conscious of an increasing sense of peace and tranquillity pervading her spirit. It was as though Mark had discerned her weariness of soul and body and, by some mysterious alchemy of the musician, had infused into the music he was playing all the sympathy and strength and upholding with which he would so gladly have encompassed her. There is no thought that passes sterile into oblivion, and, borne on the sweeping waves of sound,

something of Mark's passionate desire to help and heal her sadness seemed to reach her, filling her with a strange consciousness of being comforted and sustained.

She stayed quietly in her place until the last note had vibrated into silence. Then, as Strown, dismissing Tommy Briggs with a shilling tightly clasped in his grubby little palm, came down the chancel steps, she rose and went towards him, holding out her hands impulsively.

"Thank you, Mark," she said simply. "I was tired and feeling rather overburdened with—with life in general, and somehow you seem to have played it all away—picked up my burden and carried it for me."

His hands closed round hers, holding them in a strong, firm clasp that sent a sudden tremor of apprehension through her. She tried to release herself, to draw away from him, but he still held her with a gentle force there was no withstanding. She looked up hastily. The last rays of the setting sun struck across the chancel, illumining his face from amid the surrounding twilight, and what she read in it told her suddenly that the days of simple friendship between them were over—that he was going to ask her for something that it was not in her power to give. It would be useless to refuse to listen to him. His eyes were steadfast with purpose. If she warded off the issue now, she knew very surely that it was only postponing matters, and that the question which waited to voice itself in words would inevitably have to be asked and answered. But still an involuntary murmur of protest escaped her, although she recognized the futility of it.

He brushed it aside.

"No. Hear me—you must hear me! I've waited so long. Pat, I want to carry all your burdens—to come between you and everything in the world that hurts. I love you——" His grasp tightened, drawing her nearer to him. "Dearest, will you let me—will you give me the right to take care of you always?"

For a moment she was silent. It was so hard to feel that when she spoke she must quench that eager light in his eyes—in the eyes which had never yet met her own without the steady glow of comradeship burning in them—so bitterly hard to be compelled to hurt the friend because she had no place to give the lover.

"Pat!" The little name left his lips like a caress—infinately tender and beseeching, yet vibrant with the fire of a man's deep passion.

"Oh, Mark, I'm sorry—so sorry!" she cried brokenly.

In the silence which followed that desolate cry the two faces peered at each other through the greying light—the man's suddenly white and wrung, the woman's stricken with infinite regret.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry," she repeated whisperingly.

After a long moment he spoke again. His voice sounded flat and lifeless.

"It's no use, then?" he said heavily.

"No, Mark," she answered pitifully. "I'm afraid it isn't. I thought—I hoped we were—just friends."

Slowly he released her hands.

"It's difficult for a man to be—just friends—with you, Pat," he said quietly. Then, more insistently, his voice quickening again: "Are you sure—*sure*? I'll wait. Sweetest, don't say 'no,' now. Let me try to teach you what love means——"

A strangled sound escaped her—half sob, half bitter laughter.

"Oh, Mark, I know—I *know*!"

He stepped back.

"You know? . . . Then—there's someone else!" he cried in a harsh, awakened voice.

She bent her head. "Yes," she said slowly and painfully. "There is—someone else."

"Then why is he not with you?" he demanded swiftly.

"What are you doing here—alone? Why doesn't he ever come to you?"

She lifted her head, and he could see tears staining her white cheeks.

"He will never come now," she said. "We can never—marry—each other."

The sad finality in her tones wrenched his thoughts away from his own pain. He asked no questions, but accepted the statement as simply as she had made it.

"Pat—sweetest—is it like that?" he said very gently and kindly. He passed his arm round her shoulders. "Oh, my dear, forgive me, then, for bothering you. . . . If only I could—bear your part for you!"

Weak with physical fatigue, the tenderly uttered words broke up her self-command. For a few moments she gave way, leaning against him and crying softly, while he held her in his arms as a brother might, soothing her by his very silence and understanding. At last she mastered herself once more and drew away from him, the back of her hand pressed against her lips to still their quivering.

"I'll take you home, now," he said in a purposely matter-of-fact voice that helped her back to self-control. "You'd rather go straight back to Strangways, wouldn't you?"

She nodded silently, and a few minutes later his two-seater was bearing them swiftly homeward through the dusk to the castle. As they parted, Patricia stammered brokenly:

"Don't think I don't understand—and care, Mark. I—you see—I know how much it hurts."

"I wish to God you didn't!" he said passionately. "Don't worry about me, dear. Forget this afternoon, and only remember that I'm always just your friend."

Half an hour later he was composedly explaining Patricia's absence to the remainder of the party gathered at Anton Roy for tea.

"She was overtired," he said. "So I drove her straight

back home. She asked me to make her excuses to you, Peggy."

But, although the others apparently accepted this explanation at its face value, Mrs. Bethune was not so easily deceived.

"Mark, what happened this afternoon—after we left you?" she demanded when she and her brother were once more alone together.

For a moment he regarded her without replying. Then—for they were very near to one another, these two—he said quietly:

"I asked Patricia to marry me, and she refused. So you see"—with a rather weary smile—"you won't ever have to play second fiddle, dear."

Peggy said very little. She knew that no spoken sympathy could help in such a matter. But in her inmost heart she registered a vow that by some means or other Patricia should be prevailed upon to rescind that refusal. She would move heaven and earth to wipe that look of dumb pain out of Mark's eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FRA ANGELO CASKET

THE castle appeared curiously quiet as Patricia made her way upstairs to take off her outdoor things. There was no one to be seen, and to her keyed-up senses a strange hush seemed to have descended on the place. Hardly knowing that she was doing so, she instinctively trod softly, as if subconsciously aware of some fresh Presence in the house—as though some inner voice had told her that that inexorable figure waiting on the threshold had drawn nearer, silent and unseen.

The feeling of oppression surged up over her again in recurrent waves of heavy foreboding, but with the new strength that she had gleaned while she had sat listening to Strown's playing on the organ she was better able to withstand it, and gradually the intense depression which had threatened to engulf her passed, giving place to a quiet determination to meet bravely whatever the future had in store.

Now that she knew indubitably that Mark cared for her—had cared in secret for so long—the remembrance of his steadfast friendship during all these months filled her with a wondering sense of gratitude, almost of awe, for the selflessness which could so thrust down its own desires and give only that comradeship of which she had stood so much in need.

In a sense, she had been very lonely since she had come to England, with an inner loneliness which had been the inevitable sequence of the death of her beloved Sahib and the consequent uprooting of her whole life, and now, looking back, she realized that the friendship which Mark had given

her had gone far to counteract this. All her life she had been accustomed to the friendship and good comradeship of men—of the Sahib, of Jim O'Halloran and Colonel Grant, and last of all, of Kerry himself—and to being shielded and cared for in the many ways in which men can shield and care for a woman, and at first, after her arrival at Strangeways, she had missed all this. Kit had been too young, too much of a boy, to stand in their place. He was so much in need of help and advice himself that her attitude towards him had become almost maternal in its protectiveness.

It was Mark—she recognized it now—who had filled the lack of which she had been conscious, who had imperceptibly become the friend to whom she instinctively turned in any difficulty or emergency—Mark, whose quiet, unobtrusive service had run through all the months at Stranwood like a golden thread.

And now he had come to her asking for the one thing that was no longer hers to bestow! It was the irony of fate that her love should be given to Kerry Lorimer, who was too proud to take it, while she could only hold out empty hands to this other lover, who would have guarded the gift as his choicest treasure.

Aye, they loved very differently, these two! Kerry, selfish and arrogant, demanding all from the woman he loved whether he chose to accept or reject it, and Mark, who loved as the knights of chivalry might have loved, deeming that love meant service. And yet it was Kerry who claimed every racing beat of her heart, the sound of whose voice, the lightest touch of whose hand woke fire in her veins—Kerry, the barbarian, who despised the ordered beauty of existence which she had always known and who found his happiness in a lawless, primitive life, at naked grips with the world. While for Mark, with whom she had every taste in common, who was unselfish where Kerry was the very opposite, kind where Kerry could be cruel, she could find nothing but the calm sanity of friendship.

With a sigh, she turned to go downstairs. It was useless to fight against fate. Yet she knew if she could only have found it in her heart to care for Mark she would have been a happier woman.

At the foot of the stairs she met Lady Mary, who had just parted from the doctor and was coming in search of her.

"Jonathan is sinking," she said quietly and sadly. "He took a turn for the worse this afternoon, and Dr. Beresford does not think he will live till morning. He says he may go at any moment."

Patricia drew her into her arms.

"Oh, darling Lady Mary, I'm so sorry," she said gently. "I hope he isn't in any pain, is he?"

"No. There's no pain. He's just getting a little weaker every hour. The only thing that troubles me is that he seems fretting over something—something in the library." Lady Mary's brows puckered distressfully. "I can't make out what he wants. And now he's been asking for you. So will you go to him? You were with him in the library so often that you may be able to find out what it is he wants."

"I'll try," answered Patricia, and together they made their way to the old man's room. A nurse rose quietly as they entered and moved away into an adjoining room, and Lady Mary drew Patricia forward to the bedside.

"See, Jonathan," she said gently, as though she were speaking to a child. "I've brought Miss Luttrell. I told you she would come."

The girl looked down pitifully at the shrunken figure lying in the bed. Illness had fined the always delicate old cameo face to a strange spirituality. Somehow the look of age seemed to have gone from it, and Patricia could realize that, as a young man, there must have been a certain poetical charm about the fine head with its sensitively modelled features and in the short-sighted, dreaming eyes, now fixed on Lady Mary's face with a kind of dumb worship.

"You wanted me, didn't you, Jonathan?" she asked, bending over him.

His glance travelled slowly from Lady Mary's face to hers, lighting up with a sudden eagerness as he recognized the new-comer.

"Yes," he said quickly. "Yes, I wanted you. You'll know. . . . It's the casket."

Patricia nodded understandingly.

"I know. You mean the Fra Angelo casket?"

"That's it. That's it"—feebly. "It's in there. You never saw it, did you? You never saw it?" He spoke appealingly, his brows contracting anxiously. She thought it was worrying him to remember that he had never shown her the Fra Angelo manuscript after all, and hastened to reassure him.

"No. But that doesn't matter now. I'll wait, Jonathan, and you shall show it to me when you're better again."

For a moment he regarded her silently. Then he shook his head.

"I'm not going to get better," he said slowly, and paused for a long time as though reflecting on the curious fact that he was not going to get better. But after a moment his thoughts reverted to the casket. He thrust out a thin hand from under the bedclothes—a hand the colour of old ivory—and fidgeted restlessly with the edge of the counterpane, pleating and unpleating it. "It's there," he said. "In the casket. You'll find it, won't you?"—feverishly.

"Of course I'll find it," she answered, humouring him. "Don't worry one bit. I'll find it and have a good look at it."

"No!" he cried sharply. He struggled to raise himself in bed and Lady Mary bent forward swiftly and supported him. "No," he repeated. "Give it to her ladyship. It's for her. Oh, please, please"—entreatingly—"will you get it and give it to her?"

"He wants you to have the Fra Angelo manuscript," whispered Patricia. Then, aloud, she said: "Of course I'll get it and give it to her."

The old man closed his eyes and his lips twitched spasmodically, his face suddenly agonized.

"Are you in pain?" asked Lady Mary quickly.

He signed a negative. After a moment, he opened his eyes again and they went straight to Patricia's face.

"Yes. Give it her. It must be given to her. She'll understand." He spoke haltingly, as though speech was difficult to him. "The key——" he murmured.

"Yes, yes, I'll find it," said Lady Mary. "Is it on your bunch of keys, Jonathan dear?"

"Yes. That's it. On the bunch—on the bunch."

His key ring was lying on the dressing-table and she carried it to him. He hardly glanced at the dozen or more keys it held, but with sensitive finger-tips passing from key to key singled out the one he wanted.

"That's the one," he said. Adding querulously: "You'll find it? You're sure you'll find it? It's underneath."

"I'm quite sure," answered Patricia. "I'll go now. Don't worry about it any more."

She detached the key from the ring and left the room, and when she had gone Jonathan lay back on his pillows, panting a little.

"You'll try—to understand?" he murmured gaspingly. "You'll try, milady?"

"Of course I will, Jonathan. But I shan't be clever enough to read the manuscript, I'm afraid."

"You're good," he said. "That's better than being too clever. Too clever."

She thought his mind was wandering a little. He did not speak again for some time, but lay with closed eyes. At last he opened them and stared straight in front of him. He seemed oblivious of her presence.

"I couldn't go, you see," he said, as though making an explanation to some one. "I couldn't leave—her. I could never have left her ladyship. No one knew. . . . I kept it

all to myself. . . . But no one could help loving her. No one."

"Jonathan!" The exclamation broke involuntarily from Lady Mary's lips as she realized the drift of his disjointed utterance. The sound of her voice seemed to reach him even through the fog that clouded his brain. He looked at her with frightened, piteous eyes.

"Are you angry? Please don't be angry. I'd no right to love you, my lady. I know that. But I couldn't help it . . . I couldn't help it." His fingers worked spasmodically at the bedclothes.

She laid her hand soothingly over his agitated ones. A little flush had come into her face, but her eyes, as she bent over him, were wonderfully soft and comprehending.

"I'm not angry, Jonathan. Love is always good. It's the biggest gift of all," she said pitifully. "Thank you—for loving me."

He whispered something in reply, but she could not hear what it was. All at once he seemed to sink back into his pillows, while a change came over his face.

"Nurse!" Lady Mary called hurriedly, and the white-capped nurse was at her side almost as she called. Her practised glance took in in an instant the meaning of that change.

"He's going," she said.

Lady Mary stooped over the bed, trying to pierce the gathering mists with a last word of comfort.

"Good-bye, Jonathan," she said softly. "Faithful friend and servant."

His eyes opened once more.

"Milady!" he breathed.

. . . Anxious to set the sick man's mind at rest, Patricia hurried downstairs and made her way into the library. There the chill, unwelcoming atmosphere of a room that has been untenanted for many days rushed out at her, and she switched on the lights quickly, to dispel it, and started to

look for the Fra Angelo casket. It was nowhere to be seen, and presently it occurred to her that quite probably Jonathan had had some special hiding-place for this most precious treasure of his where he "put it to bed" at night. She wished she had asked him before she came to fetch it, but even then, she reflected, he might have been unable to give her any rational directions. He had been in a very vague and wandering state of mind, his thoughts only clearing now and again with the tenacity of his desire to place the Fra Angelo manuscript in Lady Mary's hands. The only thing to do was to make a systematic search of any such cupboards and drawers as might conceivably contain the glass-topped casket.

She hunted for a long time without success, and nearly half an hour had elapsed before, quite by accident, she discovered it tucked away at the back of a drawer full of valueless odds and ends, with a crumpled duster laid lightly over it, completely concealing it from view. She smiled a little at the old man's primitive device for throwing any prospective burglar off the scent, and, lifting out the casket with gentle hands, she inserted the key in the tiny lock. It turned quite easily, and she laid back the hinged glass lid, pausing a moment in involuntary admiration of the delicate gold leaf and scroll, the rich hues and exquisite lettering of the ancient manuscript. Then, with infinite care, she lifted it from its bed and, laying it on the table, turned back to close the case. A cry of surprise escaped her. There, lying at the bottom of the casket, and entirely concealed from view while the manuscript had lain above it, was an ordinary sealed envelope, bearing the superscription, written in Jonathan Mather's meticulously neat handwriting: "*Lady Mary Wynsborough.*" And below this: "*To be given to her in the event of my death.*"

Patricia caught her breath. Everything became suddenly clear to her. This then, this letter—not the Fra Angelo manuscript—was the real object of her search. It was to secure the delivery of this envelope into Lady Mary's hands

that the old man had been fretting. Mystified, she picked it up and fingered it bewilderedly. What could old Mathers have had to write to Lady Mary that he could not just as easily have spoken? Perhaps—and at the thought the girl's eyes softened—perhaps the letter contained some last little wish of his that he felt sure Lady Mary's kind-heartedness would see carried out. Patricia laid that pathetic last letter down on the table while she replaced the manuscript in its casket and locked it up once more. Then, picking up the letter again, she hurried with it to Jonathan's room. One of the nurses met her at the door.

"He is dead," she said. "He passed away quite peacefully a few minutes ago."

"Lady Mary?" asked Patricia anxiously.

"She has gone to her room. His lordship is with her. She's very much upset, of course."

The letter still in her hand, Patricia turned and went downstairs again, to find Kit in the hall, just returned from Anton Roy. She checked his exuberant greeting with a hurried gesture.

"Oh, hush! Jonathan is dead," she said quickly.

His face sobered. Rather awkwardly, with that tongue-tied embarrassment with which the near presence of death sometimes affects the young and strong, he asked a few questions, and Patricia told him all that had occurred, including her discovery of the letter addressed to Lady Mary.

"Godfather's with her," she added. "So I'll give it to her presently. I won't disturb them now."

"No, I shouldn't," agreed Kit. "Poor old dears! I expect they'll be frightfully cut up." His own voice was not quite free from a certain chokiness, much as he tried to disguise the fact. Jonathan Mathers, quiet, unobtrusive, and devoted, had been a figure too deeply interwoven with the familiar life at Strangways for his passing not to come as a severe shock.

Neither the Earl nor Lady Mary reappeared until dinner-

time, and then, as Kit and Patricia waited for them in the hall, they came in together. Lady Mary's face bore traces of tears, but she had regained her composure and stretched out a hand to each of the sober young people with a wistful smile. Marchdale held himself erect, leaning, perhaps, a shade more heavily than usual on his amber-headed stick. His eyes were slightly reddened round their rims and he blew his nose fiercely once or twice.

Patricia tendered the letter she had found.

"It's for you, Dresden China Lady," she explained. "I found it lying underneath the Fra Angelo manuscript."

Lady Mary took it from her wonderingly and, sitting down, slit the envelope and began to read the letter. The next moment she jumped to her feet with a cry. Her face was white. She looked frightened, and yet behind the fright in her eyes glowed the dawn of some far different emotion. Incredulous happiness seemed to fight for mastery with a startled, horrified distress.

"Blair—oh, Blair!" she cried shakily, stretching out her hand to him. He took it in his and patted it reassuringly.

"What is it, Mary?" he asked with concern. "My dear, tell me!"

"Read—read it!" she gasped, thrusting the letter towards him. "Kerry never took that money! It was—it was—Jonathan!"

CHAPTER XXVI

“THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH——”

THE funeral was over. Jonathan Mathers had been carried to his last resting-place, and now the lowered blinds had been drawn up and Patricia was standing at the window, staring out absently at the falling rain blown this way and that in sudden drifts by the gusty wind. It was a cheerless enough morning; everything wore a more or less desolate and sodden aspect. The trees, nearly denuded of their leaves, waved their naked branches forlornly as the gale buffeted them, while the distant fields and hills were almost blurred from sight.

But not even the depressing appearance of the day had power to damp the warm glow of happiness in Patricia's heart. Since the discovery that it was Jonathan, and not Kerry, who had stolen the missing fifty pounds the whole aspect of life had changed for her. Kerry had been proved triumphantly innocent, and now nothing in the wide world stood between them and the fulfilment of their love.

True, the promise of future happiness had not come to her unmixed with pain. The tragedy of all those past years of Kerry's exile could never be completely wiped out. He had suffered and paid unjustly, and the memory of that suffering would last as long as life.

The supreme joy of the Earl and Lady Mary in the vindication of their best-loved nephew's innocence was marred by their deep grief in the realization that Jonathan Mathers, the man whom they had trusted implicitly for over forty years, had deceived them so completely. At first, Lord Marchdale seemed almost overwhelmed by the discovery.

“I would as soon have suspected myself of taking that money as suspected Mathers,” he had vouchsafed unsteadily.

For him, not even Jonathan's explanation could palliate his offence. But Lady Mary had understood, and had wept a little over the pathetic record of sin and failure which the old man had left behind him. He had omitted nothing in the confession he had made, a confession written many years before Patricia found it and gave it into Lady Mary's hands. Day and night he had carried it with him until Lord Marchdale's sudden decree that the Fra Angelo manuscript should henceforth be preserved in a glass-topped case, never to be opened except by his express command, had suggested a safe hiding-place for the incriminating document. Jonathan himself was the only person who had a key to the casket, so that he ran no risk of his confession's being unexpectedly discovered.

He had written a frank avowal of all that had led up to his commission of the theft and of the reasons which afterwards sealed his lips concerning it, even though that silence had fastened the burden of guilt on Kerry's shoulders. It appeared that in a small way Mathers had been in the habit of dabbling in stocks and shares, and on one occasion, finding himself without the ready money to buy some speculative shares which promised an almost immediate rise in value, he had "borrowed" fifty pounds from the drawer where the cash which he had in charge was always kept.

"I never meant to steal it," he had written in the letter addressed to Lady Mary. "The shares were bound to rise within the next few days. I knew that. And I thought that then I could sell out at a profit and put back the money I had taken. And if his lordship hadn't chanced to go to the cash drawer the very next day and discovered that the fifty pounds were missing, everything would have been all right. He had never gone to the drawer himself before. He had always sent me.

"When he found the money had been taken, I didn't dare to confess that it was I who had taken it. I knew it would have meant instant dismissal, and I could not face being sent

away from Strangways. Over thirty years I'd served you, my lady, and Strangways was just my *life*. A woman will do wrong to save her child, because it is everything in the world to her. And I did wrong because Strangways was everything in the world to me. Will your ladyship try to understand, and perhaps—some day—forgive me? I couldn't have borne to be sent away.

"Even when his lordship suspected Master Kerry and accused him, I never anticipated that it would bring about the result it did. I didn't dream that it would be looked upon as a *theft* for Master Kerry to have taken the money. His lordship was so fond of him that I thought he would just be very angry with him for having helped himself to the fifty pounds and that then the whole matter would blow over, just as other disagreements had done.

"But it didn't. And when Master Kerry wasn't able to explain how he had got possession of fifty pounds with which to pay what he owed, I was in a worse case than ever. I *couldn't* confess then. It was too late. It would have turned you all against me, and I felt I couldn't endure that. So I said nothing.

"I've never known a really happy moment since, but I should have known still more unhappy ones if I'd confessed and been sent away. It was dreadful to me to see your ladyship crying about Master Kerry, as you sometimes did. It hurt. But it would have hurt more never to see you at all.

"I am writing this letter so that, in case of my death, Master Kerry's name will be cleared. I know I've sinned, but I couldn't face his lordship's anger. He would have sent me away, and it would have been like tearing up an old tree by the roots. In all else, I have served him faithfully, and shall so serve both him and you, my lady, to the day of my death."

The confession was an amazing mixture of selfishness and devotion—a poignant commentary on the strange bunch of

good and bad impulses which go to make up human nature. And through it all ran that appealing iteration: “*I couldn’t bear to be sent away!*” For Jonathan Mathers that had been the crux of the whole matter. Strangways was a part of him—bone of his bone—and he of Strangways, and life to him was inconceivable—a thing not to be faced—apart from the place to which every fibre of his being was indissolubly knit. Nor could he have endured to lose the good opinion of the Earl and Lady Mary. Their approbation, their complete trust and confidence in him, formed an integral part of all that Strangways signified to him. To retain this, so that he might live and die at Strangways, he had sinned. In all other ways a scrupulously faithful and loyal nature—he would have given his life willingly at any moment if by his death he could have served “the family”—on this point his moral rectitude had foundered utterly.

To Patricia the whole thing seemed unbearably sad—and unnecessary. With that ruthless logic of youth she traced it remorselessly back to its source, and laid the principal blame for the whole catastrophe on her godfather’s shoulders. Fear—fear of Lord Marchdale’s violent, unforgiving temper—had been at the root of the matter. If Jonathan had served a different master—a master who might have been trusted to set thirty years of devoted service against a single slip and give the sinner a second chance, a chance to redeem himself and make good again—he would probably have confessed to the fact that he had taken the money, although without any actual intention of stealing it, and Kerry would have been saved ten hard, embittering years. But, knowing the Earl as he did, Jonathan had been afraid—and the fact that Marchdale had instantly cut Kerry out of his life for that same sin had terribly justified the old man’s fear. If there had been such scant mercy for one of his own blood, for Lynette’s son, there would have been none at all for the humble librarian.

It was all part and parcel of an old and worn-out system—

of that despotic method by which the lords of Strangways had ever governed their households. Their word was law. Scarcely modified at all by the increasing freedom of the present age, her godfather's rule had remained a rule of old-fashioned tyranny. It was high time, as Kit had once suggested, that someone effected a reformation. Still brooding over the matter, Patricia was startled out of her thoughts by the entrance of the Earl himself.

The last two or three days had made their mark on him. His face wore a strained expression, as of a man who had suddenly come up against something in life that was new to him—new and bewildering. He crossed the room and joined Patricia in the window embrasure, and she felt her heart go out to him in the pain and trouble which she knew he was experiencing. She slipped her arm into his affectionately. In spite of all his faults—faults which were the outcome of his age and generation—he had somehow contrived to win her love. For a few moments he stood beside her in silence. Then he asked abruptly:

“How soon do you think you will get an answer to your letter?”

He had asked the same question several times before with the reiteration of intense anxiety. It had fallen to Patricia's lot to write to Kerry, telling him of Jonathan's confession and asking him to come at once to Strangways. As the Earl had bitterly remarked: “No letter from me would bring him. He's as proud as Lucifer, and would probably return it through the post unopened. I should do the same myself, in his place.” So that finally Patricia had undertaken to write to him. In her inmost heart she had doubted very much whether he would answer the summons if it were to be based solely on the discovery of his innocence. She knew his indomitable pride. Having been ruthlessly blamed and distrusted all these years, he was not the type of man to forgive and forget immediately he was proved innocent. That it would go far to break the hearts of the Earl and Lady Mary

if he did not come, he would perhaps hardly realize after so long a separation. But Patricia realized it, and she was determined that, at any cost, he must be induced to return. Swallowing her pride, therefore, she had scribbled a postscript to her letter: *“You said you would come if ever I needed you. I do need you, Kerry.”* She addressed the letter to Brihou Island, as he had bidden her.

“I couldn’t possibly hear for a day or two,” she said, in answer to Lord Marchdale’s anxious inquiry. “You see, there is no regular post at Brihou Island. I don’t quite know how Kerry gets his letters, but probably they keep them for him at the post office on one of the bigger islands until he calls for them. So, you see, it might be several days yet before we get his answer.”

“Do you think he’ll come?” demanded the Earl, his fingers working restlessly on the head of his walking-stick.

And Patricia, remembering the postscript she had added to the letter, answered quietly:

“I’m sure he will.”

Again silence fell between them—so long and so heavy a silence that presently she glanced up curiously at the tall old man beside her. But she could read nothing from his face. It was mask-like in its impassivity, the fierce grey eyes staring out towards the shrouded hills. When at last he spoke, it was with an odd abruptness and as though he were answering something she had said.

“I believe you’re right, Pat. I’m beginning to think I’ve been a damned old fool.”

Her hand tightened a little on his arm. She knew quite well whither his thoughts had wandered—to that interview which had taken place between them in the South Room, when she had interceded unavailingly for Kit and Nancy and had talked to her godfather with a simple directness which probably no one had ever dared before. She had put new views and angles of thought in front of him, and swiftly on the top of that had come Jonathan’s enlightening con-

fession, emphasizing the consequences of the Earl's accustomed tyranny so tragically that he had at last begun to realize it.

"A damned old fool," he repeated.

"Then, if you think that, why not make a fresh start?" said Patricia impulsively.

"Make a fresh start?" he echoed, regarding her curiously. "How would you propose I should begin, eh?"

She lifted a pair of resolute blue eyes to his.

"By letting Kit and Nancy marry each other," she replied. "Don't you see, they'll do it anyway, sooner or later; and if it has to be without your sanction, it will only make another big split in the family. What's the use of it all?"—earnestly. "You can't *force* your will upon anybody, nowadays, and if you try to—why, something's going to give, somewhere."

Marchdale turned and slowly paced the length of the room and back.

"Do *you* want me to give my sanction?" he demanded abruptly, halting in front of her.

"It would make me happier than anything else—except one thing."

He nodded grimly at her last words.

"Humph! I suppose in your heart of hearts you're blaming me more than a bit on your own account—yours and Kerry's?"

"Yes," she acknowledged simply.

For a moment he hesitated. Perhaps the old man was having a final struggle with his pride before he yielded reluctantly to the new order of things.

"Very well, then," he said at last, gruffly. "Have it your own way. I expect"—with the glimmer of a smile—"you always will have your own way. You're the sort of woman who does. You can tell those two young fools they've my permission to get married. Or, at any rate," he added,

unwilling to concede too much at one fell blow, “they may get engaged.”

Within a quarter of an hour Queenie was standing, saddled and bridled, at the door, and Patricia, having effected a marvellous quick-change into riding kit, mounted and rode off in the direction of the Rectory. She had private grounds for supposing that she would find Kit there.

Nor was she mistaken. Upstairs, the shabby old school-room, with its threadbare carpet and its table scarred with scratches and ink-stains reminiscent of earlier days, had been adapted to a new and pleasanter purpose than that for which it had been originally designed. When Patricia burst in breathlessly upon them with her good news, Kit and Nancy were sitting happily together on the faded hearthrug, dividing their attention between one another and a small regiment of chestnuts toasting on the bars of the old-fashioned grate.

At first, they could hardly credit the tidings she brought; but when at last she had convinced them that the ban which Lord Marchdale had laid upon their engagement was really and truly removed, the rejoicings that followed were of such a nature that the Rector, passing by chance along the passage outside the schoolroom, looked in to see what the cheery babel was all about. Matters were speedily explained to him. He evinced no particular astonishment, so perhaps the explanation was hardly necessary—since Bernard Waybrant, although he had refrained from comment, had been by no means blind to the march of events during the last few months. He kissed his daughter and shook hands heartily with Kit, and, adding his consent to that of Lord Marchdale, together with a few wise words, turned to Patricia.

“You’re a very wonderful young woman, Pat,” he said, smiling at her. “Do you think Kerry knows how wonderful?”

Patricia, taken by surprise, flushed vividly, and Waybrant’s smile broadened.

"News travels quickly in country places," he explained with a twinkle. "And the doings at the 'big house' are always known throughout the whole village in an amazingly short space of time. The village folk have their own methods of 'broadcasting.'" He held out his hand and Patricia slid hers within it.

"My dear," he went on gently, "I knew Kerry all his life until that unhappy quarrel with his uncle drove him away from Strangways, and no one will rejoice more over his happiness—and yours—than I shall."

"And we've got to thank you for ours," joined in Nancy fervently. "We owe it all to you. Oh, Pat, I do hope that some day I'll have the chance of doing you a good turn—of paying you back!"

The eager, warm-hearted speech was characteristic of her. But she little thought, in the first flush of her own new-found happiness, how soon and in what suddenly tragic circumstances that chance would offer.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RETURN

DUSK was falling as Patricia made her way rapidly up the long drive to the castle. It had been raining all day, and when, late in the afternoon, the skies cleared, she had offered to take a message Lady Mary wished delivered to the lodge-keeper's wife, glad of an excuse to get out for a breath of fresh air.

Three days had gone by since her joyful visit to the Rectory, and as yet no letter had come from Kerry. The consequent tension at the castle was beginning to wear on her nerves a trifle. Lord Marchdale became daily more fidgety and irritable, while a look of wistful apprehension was growing in Lady Mary's eyes.

"If he should refuse to come—after all!" She had voiced her secret fear to Patricia only the day before.

"He won't refuse. Dear Dresden China Lady, I'm sure he'll come."

The assurance had been given vehemently—perhaps the more vehemently in that a tiny, insidious doubt was beginning to creep into Patricia's own heart. And now, another day had gone by, and still no sign or word from Kerry! The little cold feeling of doubt drew more closely round her heart, as a snake loops yet another coil of its clammy body round the limbs of its prey. She still believed that if Kerry had had her letter he would come. What she feared was that he had possibly never received it. By this time he might have quitted his island—that "handful of green acres" which he loved—and gone ranging across the world once more, unable to stay longer in one corner of it, alone with his memories.

Patricia quickened her pace. All at once, the dusk and the fitful dripping from the leafless branches of the trees, the whole sad atmosphere of autumn, seemed to close down on her, and she hurried along ever more and more quickly, filled with a subconscious desire to escape from it into the cheerful warmth and light indoors.

Suddenly she caught the sound of a man's footsteps behind her, and she glanced back a trifle apprehensively. There was no one in sight, but sight could travel so short a distance through the deepening twilight that that counted for very little. It was probably only one of the keepers, she told herself. Still, it was equally possible that it might prove to be an undesirable loafer who had strayed into the park, or a poacher early astir, and she put on an extra spurt of speed, hoping to outstrip the intruder. But with the quickening of her own steps she heard a corresponding quickening of the steps that followed her, and a feeling of genuine alarm took the place of the slight nervousness which the sound of those pursuing feet had first aroused in her. She dared not run. To do so would probably only spur the man who was following her into running likewise, and if it came to a race between them she knew that he would be certain to overtake her long before she came within sight of the castle. But, short of actually breaking into a run, she sped along as fast as she could, her heart thumping in her breast.

Nearer and nearer came the pursuing steps. She could even hear a small stone fly from beneath their tread and go leaping and bounding to the side of the drive. Realizing that it was useless hoping to outdistance the man, she pulled up, resolved to face him and demand his business rather than continue what was rapidly degenerating into an undignified flight. She stopped abruptly and swung round, bracing her nerves for the encounter. And then a voice came to her out of the dusk—a voice with a familiar undercurrent of amusement running through it.

"Thank heavens you've at last decided to turn and face

the brute! I'd no idea before that any woman could walk so abominably fast."

"Kerry!" The word broke from Patricia in a cry made up of infinite relief and of sudden, unbelievable joy.

The next moment his arms were round her, holding her in a grip of steel as though he would never let her go again, and he was kissing her with a fierce, overwhelming passion that almost frightened her.

"Sweetheart! Beloved! . . ." The words came stumbling from his lips, hoarse and shaken with the love and longing which had been so long held back. "You're mine now! . . . I can claim you. . . . Soul of me!"

She made no answer, too overwrought by the suddenness of revulsion from suspense and doubt to the supreme joy of finding herself in his arms. In an instant his suspicions were aroused—alert for danger as the senses of a wild creature of the forest. He peered down at her through the growing dusk.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Why don't you speak? Patricia"—his grasp tightening round her so that she could scarcely draw breath—"Patricia!—am I too late? Have you set another man in my place?"

"Ah, no, no!" she cried. "Of course I haven't! How could you think such a thing? It's only that I was so surprised—so glad. And"—smiling—"you didn't give me the chance to—to *speak* much, did you?"

He gave her even less chance after that, kissing her stormily on eyes and mouth and on the white, pulsing throat where her furs had held the warmth of her. She lay in his arms, yielding tremulously to the imperious passion that surged over her, conscious only of the utter rapture of his nearness, of the supreme ecstasy of absolute surrender. Nothing could come between them any more. They were together—the dividing wall that had held them apart shattered for ever.

At last, with a little quivering sigh, she withdrew herself from his arms.

"Kerry, we mustn't stay here any longer," she said soberly. "Remember, godfather and Lady Mary are waiting all this time—they don't even know you're here. We—we mustn't be selfish."

"But I'm going to be selfish—over you," he returned royally, catching her back into his arms again and raining fresh kisses on her face. "Very selfish. Are you prepared for that, sweetheart? I've had to go without you for so long that I shall grudge every other man a word with you—the touch of your hand, even. You're mine, every bit of you."

"I don't want to be anyone else's," she answered happily.

"That's just as well. Because, however much you wanted it, I should never let you go—now. So I trust there's no one else who covets my belongings?"

She made no answer, and the kindly twilight hid the swift flush that stained her cheeks. He had spoken lightly, with an arrogant assurance of possession that was characteristic. But the silence which followed his careless question seemed suddenly to strike him, rousing him to a swift misgiving.

"There is no one else?" he repeated.

"I've told you," she answered quietly. "There is no one who has taken your place, beloved. How could there be?"

"But you haven't said there is no one else who wants it,"—jealously. "Who is it, Pat? Is it one of the natives—some countrified fellow who's been mouldering in this precious little parish all his life—who's had the cheek——"

"It was not cheek," she said with decision. "Any more than it was—'cheek'—for you to love me."

Kerry shook her gently.

"Aggravating child! I suppose you're right. But I hate to think of any other man's daring even to want you. Tell me, what is he like, this other lover of yours?"

"As unlike you as he could possibly be," she returned, smiling rather sadly. In her heart she knew that she had never spoken truer words. No one could be more unlike

this imperious, demanding lover of hers, with his splendid egotism, than Mark Strown.

"And do you care for him—this man who is so different from me?" There was a hard ring in his voice. It sounded almost cruel. "Perhaps the contrast appealed to you?"

"I care for him very much indeed," she answered warmly. She felt the arms that still enfolded her spring apart.

"Do you mean that, Pat?" he demanded savagely.

"Yes, I do mean it"—loyally. "He is the best friend any woman could have. But you—— Oh, my Kerry, you're the best—lover!"

His arms closed round her possessively again.

"He may have your friendship," he said. "I've no use for it. I want you—and your love."

She clung to him.

"You have them—both," she whispered.

Presently she reminded him once more of those who were still waiting in ignorance of his return, and at last they bent their steps towards the castle. As they went, she recounted the happenings of the previous few days, including the last hours of Jonathan Mathers. Curiously enough, Kerry seemed to harbour no bitterness towards the old librarian. His bitterness had been all for those of his own kin who had so distrusted him.

"Poor old Jonathan!" was all he said. "It must have been a hell of a life for him—afterwards. A degree or two worse than mine"—grimly.

"When did you get my letter?" asked Patricia, as they drew near the castle. Kerry's eyes were fixed curiously on its great grey bulk looming through the dusk, chequered here and there with orange where lights gleamed behind shaded windows. It was ten years since he had passed between its doors—ten years! With an effort he recalled his thoughts from the long road down which they had wandered.

"Your letter?" he said. "I didn't get it for a day or two. They keep my letters for me at Sark, and I go across there

twice a week in a motor-boat I've got and fetch them. That's why I didn't wait to reply, but came straight on by the next Southampton boat."

"And Paddy?" she said. "Where have you left him?"

A brief smile crossed Kerry's lips.

"He's mounting guard over the island in my absence," he replied.

"You don't mean to say you've left him there—alone?" she exclaimed, horrified.

"Oh, no. I have a man called Barnes now, an ex-soldier, who is chef and housemaid and everything else combined. My entire staff, in fact, and as good a fellow as ever stepped. Only he can't step very far, poor devil. He lost a leg in the war."

"And I suppose that's why you took him on?" said Patricia softly. "Because he couldn't get a decent job elsewhere."

"Because I thought we were eminently suited to one another—both derelicts," he answered, with a flash of his old cynicism.

She squeezed his arm.

"You're not that—now."

"True." He gave a short, amused laugh. "Barnes will think I've taken a mean advantage of him."

By this time they had reached the castle, and leaving Kerry in a room by himself, she hurried away to tell her godfather and Lady Mary of his return. She feared to take him straight to them, lest the unexpectedness of his arrival should prove too much for nerves already strained by days of suspense. And it was just as well that she had taken this precaution. Marchdale himself received the news with no outward sign of emotion beyond a sudden compression of the lips, but Lady Mary went very white, and her timid eyes sought Patricia's face entreatingly as they all three stood together outside the door of the room where Kerry was waiting.

"Pat, is he very angry with us?" she began tremulously. "Do you think he will ever forgive us?"

Patricia bent and kissed her.

"Go in and see," she said smilingly. She opened the door, and as the Earl and Lady Mary entered she closed it gently behind them, leaving them alone with the man whom they had so much wronged and yet so much loved.

It was not till some time later that she rejoined them, and then the Earl pulled her forward with a grim smile.

"Here's the only one of us who's been worth her salt, Kerry. This girl always believed in you."

"Yes," said Lady Mary sorrowfully, putting her arm round Patricia and kissing her. "Pat has shamed us all." Then, turning back to her nephew, she went on: "I still can't conceive why you didn't deny the whole thing, Kerry—one word from you would have been enough. It was your utter silence that made it so difficult to believe—what one was aching to believe!"

"I can explain it now," he said. "I couldn't, at the time. Do you remember a Mrs. Carlyon—a pretty little dark-eyed woman who used to live at Ravenhurst in those days?"

"Nita Carlyon? Why, yes, of course I remember her. But what had she to do with it?"—looking at him with puzzled eyes.

"Everything," returned Kerry rather grimly. He pulled out his pocket-book, and taking from it a half-sheet of note-paper, somewhat creased and crumpled with age, handed it to the Earl. "That's my explanation, sir—only I couldn't show it you at the time."

Marchdale adjusted his monocle and stared down at the sheet of paper crossed by a fluent, girlish handwriting. Then he read aloud, slowly, and with gathering astonishment in his tones:

"DEAR KERRY,—

"Here at last is the money you lent me—a little later than I promised, I'm afraid. I daren't send it by cheque, because George always looks through my cheque-book every

quarter. So I'm sending it in gold. (I've been collecting it for quite a while!) Thank you and bless you a thousand times. I'll not get into such a scrape again. Yours,
"NITA."

"So that's where the money came from?" said Marchdale. "Gad! What a confounded young fool you were, Kerry!"

He removed his eyeglass and polished it furiously with his handkerchief. But Lady Mary still looked perplexed.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand yet, Kerry dear," she said wistfully. "Why did you lend Mrs. Carlyon any money? They were very rich people, weren't they?"

"Very rich," agreed Kerry dryly. "Only Nita daren't ask Carlyon for the money she wanted for this particular purpose, whatever it was. He was very careful how he spent his riches. She came to me one day, telling me that she was urgently in need of fifty pounds—at once. We were always good pals, you know. It seemed that she had overdrawn her banking account as far as the bank would let her go, and she daren't ask her husband for any more money till next quarter-day, when he always paid her allowance into the bank for her. I never knew why she wanted the money. It was enough for me that she needed it—desperately badly. I was stony, as usual"—with a short laugh—"so I borrowed the amount from a man I knew and gave it to her. Later on, he, too—the man I borrowed from—found himself short. He'd been betting pretty heavily and lost a goodish bit, and he asked me to pay him back. That was when I asked you for an advance on my allowance, sir," he added, looking towards his uncle. "Then, just in the nick of time, Mrs. Carlyon sent me back the fifty pounds—in gold, as she said, and done up in a box and brown paper like any ordinary parcel. I couldn't tell you about it, as if you'd instituted inquiries and anything had leaked out and got back to her husband, he'd never have rested till he'd routed out the whole business. He was a big, jealous brute of a man, and I knew she was frightened to

death lest he should find out about the loan. So, you see"—smiling faintly—"I had to hold my peace, for Nita's sake."

As he ceased, Lady Mary gave a little cry and ran to him.

"Oh, Kerry, Kerry!" she exclaimed, half-laughing, half-sobbing. "What foolishness! What quixotic, boyish foolishness! But I love you for it!"

"Well," he said, with a sudden abashed kind of awkwardness that took years from his age, almost bringing back for a moment the boy of a decade ago. "Well, you see, I couldn't let her down."

The Dresden China Lady stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

"I'm so glad you couldn't—so glad," she said shakily. And then she ran out of the room with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Patricia went with her, and upstairs, in the seclusion of Lady Mary's room, they cried a little together, smiling through their tears, as women will when a great and almost unbelievable happiness has befallen them.

Meanwhile the Earl and his nephew settled matters with a brief understanding hand-shake, and presently Kit and Nancy came in and were made sharers in the general rejoicing. Kerry smiled slightly when it was intimated to him that his cousin and the Rector's daughter were engaged.

"You won't be bothered with either of us very long, then, sir," he observed to his uncle when they were alone again, Kit and Nancy having betaken themselves in a whirlwind rush to the Rectory to confide the good news to Bernard Waybrant. "You know about Patricia and me?"

Marchdale nodded.

"Yes," he said. "She told me that day—the day she took me to task so thoroughly for ever having doubted you. I'm glad, Kerry. There's no woman in the world I'd sooner see you married to than—than Barbara Luttrell's daughter. Look here," he went on. "Kit will have to have the Dower House, of course. But there's Hurst Manor. Colonel Broadcliff's lease expires there in the spring. You and Patricia can have the Manor."

Kerry shook his head.

"Thank you, sir. It's very good of you to offer it to us. But I shall never settle in England."

The old man's face fell.

"Not settle in England? What do you mean? Kerry boy, you'll not go off again abroad? Surely you'll stay with us—now?"

"We shall come back to see you, of course, sir. But I couldn't stay in England. It's too small, too civilized. I've learned to be free—to know the meaning of big spaces. I could never bear to be cooped up again."

"You wouldn't be cooped up," replied the Earl testily. "Am I cooped up? Is Mary cooped up? We live a decent social life; there's hunting and shooting. What more do you want?"

"I'm afraid I should find the hunting and shooting rather tame compared with going out after big game. And as for a conventional social life, I shouldn't stick it a year. I've learned to know what real freedom means—and to like it."

"Damn your freedom!" came explosively from Marchdale. "A man should settle down when he marries."

Kerry regarded him gravely—even a little sadly.

"It's no good, sir. Once, I might have done as you ask—before I'd tasted what freedom means. But not now. And you can't put back the clock."

There, for the moment, the matter was allowed to drop. But in the old Earl's heart a new fear had sprung to life—the fear that he had not yet paid the full price for his distrust and disbelief of years ago—that the final toll might have to be reckoned in Kerry's ineradicable love for the solitary places of the earth, born of the years in which he had wandered there.

It would be a very heavy price to pay. It meant finding Kerry only to lose him again—and with him, Patricia, the living link betwixt himself and the woman he had loved. With the thought of Patricia came a gleam of hope. He did

not think that life in the desert places of the world would appeal to her. Perhaps, for her sake, Kerry would renounce the idea. Men in love did such things—gave up their dreams and turned their faces away from the big, free life that called to them. But—was Kerry the type of man who would do this?

In the Earl's ears his words rang ominously: "*You can't put back the clock.*"

CHAPTER XXVIII

SUNLIGHT

THE days which followed Kerry's return were days of the most complete happiness Patricia had ever known. Not only was her own life now crowned with the royal gift of love, but the lives of all around her seemed to emanate happiness, too. With the lifting of the cloud that had rested upon Kerry for so long, the spell of gloom and sadness which had enveloped the castle melted away. Lady Mary went about with a new look of quiet gladness in her eyes, and the Earl himself mellowed to an unwonted amiability.

"He's completely forgetting his rôle," Kit remarked frivolously to Patricia. "If he goes on at this rate, he'll develop into quite a jovial old gentleman in course of time."

Patricia giggled. It required a long stretch of imagination to visualize Marchdale developing into a jovial old gentleman, even in the far-distant future. But there was no question that the whole atmosphere at Strangways held an unaccustomed sense of light-heartedness and joy—which, perhaps, was not much to be wondered at, considering that two pairs of lovers were contributing towards it.

Those were golden hours which Kerry and Patricia spent together, learning a little more about each other every day, exploring with the breath-taking delight of the discoverer those odd corners and crannies of each other's minds which the curious, disjointed nature of their former companionship had left uncharted. Sometimes they walked for miles along the cliffs overlooking the sea. At others they would go for a motor run—Kerry, as might have been expected, sending the car flashing along the level roads at a reckless speed which only his uncanny skill and nerves of iron could justify, and

often they rode together in the Forest, Queenie dancing coquettishly alongside the big black horse with wicked, rolling eyes and the temper of a fiend which Kerry bestrode as unconcernedly as though it were a model of all the equine virtues.

Not even the gaunt hand of winter could avail to strip the Forest of its beauty. The bareness of oak and beech and ash was counterbalanced by the eternal green of the winged firs, and the long, grass-spread alleys, brown with fallen pine-needles, still held their deep, mysterious charm. Once Kerry led the way into the glade where he had camped when he was caravanning. It looked oddly lonely and untenanted, Patricia thought, and she shivered a little as her eyes fell upon the tree which the lightning had blasted. His glance followed the same direction.

"I wonder how many people owe their happiness to a thunderstorm," he said with a queer twist of his lips. "But for that flash, which I thought had killed you, I should have gone my ways—and that other lover whom you're keeping up your sleeve would probably have had cause to bless the day."

A few days later the inevitable meeting between him and Mark Strown occurred. It happened quite by accident. The weather had hardened to a sharp frost, and Peggy and her brother had walked over to Strangways one afternoon. Finding that everyone was out, they were returning home when they encountered Kerry and Patricia at the lodge gates. Patricia flushed a little, but she had recognized that this first awkwardness of meeting must come sooner or later, and in a measure she was prepared for it.

"Turn back with us and have some tea," she suggested, when the introductions had been effected. Accordingly they retraced their steps towards the castle, Peggy leading the way with Lorimer and chattering volubly as they went, while Mark fell behind with Patricia. They walked a few yards in silence. Then Strown halted.

"So he has come to you—after all, Pat?" he said quietly.

There was a world of pain in his voice, and yet it held the old, unfailing kindness—a kindness that cut her to the heart.

“How did you know—it was he?” she asked very low.

“How did I know?” He gave a short, bitter laugh—the first note of bitterness she had ever heard escape him. “Ah, my dear, how does one know when the sun shines or the rain falls? For days I had been thinking of you as being as lonely and unhappy as I am myself, wishing only that I could have saved you from any such suffering. Then, we heard, Peggy and I, that Lorimer had come back and that you were engaged to him. I wondered if he were the man you loved, or whether you had promised yourself to him, perhaps long ago, before you met that other. . . . And then, just now, I saw you coming towards us, and I knew. You hadn’t seen us. You were thinking only of the man at your side, and your face was transfigured. It was the face of an utterly happy woman.”

For a moment she could find no words with which to answer him. She knew she must have looked happy. She had felt it—that uprushing, brimming-over happiness of youth which has just stepped into its kingdom of love—and she could realize how that look of happiness on her face must have stunned him with its sudden revelation of the truth.

“Oh, Mark,” she exclaimed miserably, “it makes me feel a beast—to be so happy when I’ve only been able to make you wretched. I wish—I wish you’d never seen me!”

“I don’t,” he said, smiling faintly. “Never feel that, Pat, never wish it. I’d rather have met you and loved you, and had the pain of it, than never have known what it was to love you. And I’m glad, dear, of your happiness. That makes all the difference in the world—to know that you’re happy.” He took her hands in his and, stooping, laid his lips for a moment against them. “God keep you so, Pat.”

He released her gently, and they walked on side by side. Her heart was heavy within her. Why must her happiness be bought at the cost of so much pain to someone else? Was

there always a price to be paid for happiness? It seemed to her as though, throughout her life, sweet and bitter were for ever destined to be inextricably mingled together.

She felt thankful when at length she and Mark reached the house and joined the others in the great hall. A huge log fire blazed on the open hearth, sending flickering spurts of light climbing up the panelled walls, while the figures of Lorimer and Peggy were sharply silhouetted against its ruddy glow. It all looked very homely and cosy and inviting. She rang for tea, and the entrance of the solemn Mitford and one of the footmen, bringing in the requisite paraphernalia with all due ceremony, served still further to restore the atmosphere to normal.

No matter what great griefs or joys arrive to shake our lives, the ordinary routine of meal-times, of getting up and going to bed, dressing and undressing, goes on just the same. Interrupted, maybe, for an hour or two, a day, perhaps, but sooner or later its necessities drive us along as before, regardless of whether we travel with light feet or with feet that lag and loiter by the way. Travel we must. In life there is no standing still to hug our joys or to brood over our sorrows. And there was something of the grim irony of fate in the companionable consumption of hot scones and light cross-fire of tea-table talk amongst the four people gathered round the fire at Strangways that afternoon, the thread of whose lives was so curiously interwoven that what brought happiness to the one must of necessity bring pain and sadness to the other.

Peggy and Mark left early, and when they had gone Kerry looked across at Patricia with an odd expression in his eyes.

"I'm not at all sure that you've chosen the better man, Pat," he remarked dryly.

She started, and the quick, sensitive colour rushed up into her face.

"You've—guessed?" she said.

He stood looking down at her in silence for a moment. Then:

"Yes, I've guessed. And I know a man when I see one," he added. Laying his hands on her shoulders, he drew her towards him. "Do you know that you've passed by the pure gold and taken the dross? I shall never love you in the way that fellow Strown would love you, Pat. He'd put you first—always, give—where I should take."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, I know that," she said. "Mark is absolutely unselfish in his love."

A vexed, thwarted look came into his eyes. A man may choose in an expansive moment to admit that he has certain faults, but he is not generally overjoyed to find that the woman he loves is in entire agreement with him.

"Perhaps you repent of your choice, after all," he returned stormily, releasing his hold of her abruptly. "In that case, you'd better say so before it's too late."

Patricia looked at him quickly.

"Oh, Kerry, you great big *boy!*" she exclaimed, laughing. "Of course, I know that Mark is a far more unselfish character than you are. But don't you see what makes all the difference? I don't happen to love him—and I do love you."

He caught her back into his arms and covered her face with kisses, triumphantly sure of himself and of her.

"You'll have to be content with your 'dross,' beloved, after this! I shall never again, in a sudden attack of modesty, give you another chance to escape from me. You're mine, now and till the end of time."

Till the end of time! She asked for nothing better. As she surrendered her lips once more to his it seemed to her that the future stretched ahead radiant and glorious with promise.

. . . But low down on the horizon there floated a small cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, which might yet spread and cover the whole sky with darkness. And only Lord Marchdale, with the long, long sight of age and bitter experience, had glimpsed it.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CALL OF THE WILD

THE frost had strengthened until now it held the whole country-side in a grip of iron, binding the running streams and converting the lake at Strangways into a vast sheet of glimmering steel-grey ice. From the general aspect of the weather it looked as though there were no likelihood of any immediate change, and skating, as far as the younger generation was concerned, had become the order of the day.

Prolonged frost, of a quality to yield good skating, being amongst the rarest of treats vouchsafed by the English climate, Kit had been inspired by the present condition of things to propose an ice carnival on the Strangways lake, and, with the good-humoured sanction of the Earl, invitations had accordingly been sent out broadcast. It was to be a carnival of carnivals, with a torch-light procession, bonfires, refreshments served in a tent erected on the edge of the lake, and, to add to the gaiety of nations, a band which should discourse inspiriting music until midnight.

And now the great day had arrived, and a small army of workmen and servants could be seen flitting hither and thither, completing the arrangements for the forthcoming festivities in the evening. A large marquee reared its grey shape above the frosted grass; tall poles, with strings of Chinese lanterns festooned from one to the other, ringed the lake; while at appropriate intervals were stacked huge fagots of wood, piled up in readiness for the promised bonfires.

Muffled respectively in furs and fur-lined great-coat, Patricia and her godfather, arm in arm, were reviewing the scene of operations. She had been skating earlier in the

morning, only relinquishing this occupation to accompany Lord Marchdale on his tour of inspection.

"Don't you think Kit has stage-managed it all very well?" she asked, as, having completed the circuit of the lake, they bent their steps homewards.

"Humph! He's certainly shown a better knack of organization than I ever credited him with," admitted her godfather. "How much have you and Kerry helped him, eh?" he demanded shrewdly.

"Not a bit—honest Injun," she assured him, laughing. "Kit and Nancy have fixed up the whole thing unaided. You wait, godfather, until they're married and living at the Dower House. There are some farms and a good bit of land attached to it, aren't there?" Then, as he nodded assent: "Well, you'll find Kit will make quite a good landowner when the time comes. He's really keen about things—only you've never let him have a free hand, you know."

"Oh, of course, it's sure to be my fault!" he growled, but there was a reluctant twinkle in his eyes which went far to contradict the gruffness of his tones. "And what sort of a landowner will Kerry make, may I ask? I suppose you're competent to give an opinion in that direction, at any rate?"

She smiled.

"I'm afraid he's got no land to experiment upon at present—unless you count Brihou Island as a 'residential estate'!"

"But suppose he had? Supposing"—cautiously—"Hurst Manor were available for him?"

"Hurst Manor? Do you mean that lovely old place near Ravenhurst?"

"Yes, I do mean that lovely old place near Ravenhurst. It happens to belong to me, and, as the present tenant doesn't want it any longer, I thought of giving it to Kerry. Do you think he'd like it? Would *you* like it?" He threw a swift, searching glance at her from under his wrinkled lids.

"Would I like it!" She recollected Hurst Manor as em-

bracing a thousand or more acres—surely space enough even to please Kerry! “Is it a pleasant hobby of yours to go handing round large chunks of the county like that?” She rallied the Earl with dancing eyes.

“No, it is not,” he snapped. “But—I owe Kerry something, you see. Though I know,” he added hastily, fearful lest his remarkably candid young god-daughter should fire off one of her pertinent comments at him,—“though I know a few acres of land aren’t precisely compensation for ten damnable years.”

In an instant Patricia’s heart melted to kindness. She squeezed her godfather’s arm.

“I think he’ll understand, though, just what you mean by giving him Hurst Manor. Have you said anything to him about it yet?”

A guarded look came into Lord Marchdale’s eyes. He was not well versed in the arts of Machiavelli—diplomacy is rarely an adjunct of the autocrat—and he felt that it behoved him to walk warily if his scheme for keeping Kerry in England were to be successful.

“I believe I did just mention the matter to him,” he rejoined in a casual tone of voice. “But very likely it’s slipped out of his mind. He hasn’t said anything to you about it, I suppose—or about his future plans?”

“Not a word. We haven’t discussed the future at all. I think”—dreamily—“we’ve been too happy in the present.”

“Well, how would it be if you told him?”

“Oh, godfather! May I?”

By this time they had reached the house, and Patricia halted excitedly as they entered the hall. “May I really?”

The Earl nodded.

“You may. Tell him that Hurst Manor will be my wedding-present.”

Impulsively she threw her arms round his neck.

“I always declared you were a gem amongst godparents!” she exclaimed, kissing him warmly.

After that, it was difficult to contain her impatience until Kerry's return. He had gone up to London by the early morning train and was not expected back again until late in the afternoon. When he came, Patricia was sitting alone in the hall, curled up in a big arm-chair by the fire.

A bang of the great oaken door of the castle heralded his arrival. Followed a few seconds' pause—long enough for a man in a hurry to pull off his overcoat—and then the sound of quick, eager footsteps as he came striding into the hall. In his hand he carried a telegram, its dull red envelope carelessly ripped open. His eyes were curiously bright, the pupils still a little dilated with the concentration of driving through the winter dusk, and just above the ears his hair was lightly powdered over with a spray of hoar-frost. Afterwards, Patricia remembered with a curious numb feeling of astonishment how she had noted all these trivial, unimportant details. She even remembered how cool his lips had felt, fresh from the sharpness of the outside air, as he kissed her.

"I've news for you, sweetest," he announced.

"And so have I for you," she returned, smiling. "Which shall we have first—yours or mine? Is yours good?"

"The best in the world. Oh, Pat, Pat—belovedest woman! At last the big things of life are coming to us—the things that count." Leaning over her chair, he picked her up bodily out of it and set her on her feet in front of him, still retaining his clasp of her. His eyes were brilliant with a light of splendid triumph. "Listen, adored! I, even I—wanderer upon the face of the earth that I am—have now a home and a roof-tree of my own to offer you!"

"Then you've seen godfather, after all?" she exclaimed in surprise. "He's told you—about Hurst Manor. Oh, Kerry, isn't it dear of him to give it to us?"

"Hurst Manor! We're not going to live there." He hardly seemed to take in the drift of what she was saying, merely catching the name Hurst Manor and dismissing it carelessly. "This"—he held out the telegram—"this con-

cludes a bargain. I didn't tell you before, lest the deal should fall through. But now I've got it!"—exultantly. "I've bought a tract of land in Rhodesia—almost virgin soil. Hardly cultivated at all, because the chap who owned it crocked up in health. There isn't even a house on it—only a shanty where we'll have to picnic while the house—*our* house, Pat!—is building. It will have to be the tin mug and plate, after all, sweet! But I'll wash them up——"

He was running on, overflowing with the joy of attainment, hardly heeding how she was taking it, when all at once she twisted herself out of his clasp and stepped back from him, staring at him with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Rhodesia? *Rhodesia?*" she repeated. "Kerry, what do you mean? What in the world are you talking about? We—we aren't going to live in Rhodesia!"

"Oh, but indeed we are, sweetheart! We shall become hewers of wood and drawers of water for a space, and dig our livelihood from the soil itself. At least, I shall do the digging; you won't. You'll wear blue ginghams," he explained gaily, with masculine fatuity, "and bake cakes. But it will be *life!* We shall be free as air—literally monarchs of all we survey. It will be our farm—our very own—to make what we will of it. Isn't it glorious?"

"*Glorious!*" There was a peculiar note in her voice. Then she gave a queer little laugh. It sounded as though it were jerked out of her. "I don't think you've taken in *my* piece of news, Kerry," she went on quickly. "You won't need the farm in Rhodesia. We can have a roof-tree of our own, here in England. Godfather is going to give us Hurst Manor."

He nodded.

"Oh, I know he's willing to do that. And it's decent of him. But I don't want to live in England. It's far too cramped and civilized a life for a barbarian like me."

"And what about me?"

The little question came with a curious clipped precision

that at last arrested Kerry's attention. He regarded her uncertainly, with frowning eyes.

"What do you mean?" he said quickly. "You didn't suppose, did you, that I ever thought of living here permanently—living in England?"

"I never supposed anything else," she answered. "Why shouldn't you? There's nothing now to keep you away from England. You're cleared—absolutely cleared—of that false charge. Kerry,"—an underlying note of fear in her voice—"I don't understand you."

She was conscious of a heavy sense of foreboding, of the presence of strange, unexpected forces, vaguely, confusedly aware that somehow, within the last few minutes, the entire position of things had changed—was changing so rapidly that she was losing grip. Quarter of an hour ago the whole of her life had appeared so settled—stretching out ahead of her in the happy, normal prospect of marriage and a home in England—a home near those she had grown to love, the safe waters of harbour, as it were, after the storms which had seemed at one time as though they must engulf her happiness for ever. Whereas now she felt bewildered. That certainty of things, that happy security, was crumbling in her grasp, and she felt as if she were groping in a fog for some familiar landmark.

"Kerry," she said urgently. "There's no need for you to live in exile now."

For a moment he was silent. To Patricia it seemed as though that moment prolonged itself into hours. At last he spoke.

"No," he said slowly, a curious note in his voice. "No, there's no need. But I thought you'd understand. Do you remember I once told you that I'd like to take you right out of the over-civilized, hothouse life you'd been leading and show you what life could mean independent of surroundings? Do you remember?" he repeated insistently.

Her thoughts flew back—back to that night, now nearly a year ago, when she and Kerry had stood at the tent door together, looking across the Indian plains, and he had scoffed at the conventions of civilized existence, while she had fiercely upheld them, resenting his frank contempt. She could recall the whole scene—the moonlight silvering the canvas tents, the warm, quivering glow of the camp fires, and the tense, set face of the man who had stood beside her. “*You might happen to have a barbarian lover,*” he had said. “*Love doesn’t always trouble itself as to whether a man and woman have tastes in common. It just tangles them up, and there they are.*” It was true. All that he had said. And now she was beginning to feel the pull and pressure of those tangling cords.

“I remember,” she answered him dully.

“Well, then, surely you understand? I want to take you away—right away into the big, clear places of the world, where our love won’t be stifled and crowded out by a mass of utter trivialities. Do you suppose that now, after ten years of the freest life a man ever led, I could come back and live in a pettifogging little country town, with a tea-fight as the principal excitement——”

“It wouldn’t be like that,” she interrupted impetuously. “That’s not fair, Kerry. You know that for us life wouldn’t be circumscribed like that. That’s not the type of life our kind of people live, and you know it.”

“Conceding that, even the life we should lead—the sort of life you did lead in Coomara—is a paltry, artificial kind of thing.”

She stood silently twisting her hands together. She was beginning to realize, now, what the force was that was beating up around her—against which she had been blindly and confusedly struggling. It was the force of that untamable love of freedom which ran in Kerry’s veins, the call of the wild—the inexorable aftermath of ten years’ exile. And

realizing it, she felt as though a great gulf had suddenly opened at her feet, and that she and Kerry were standing one on each side of it, utterly and hopelessly divided.

It almost seemed as if in the same moment realization came to him, too. He stepped forward and caught her back into his arms, while his eyes searched her face relentlessly. There was a new, *awakened* expression in them.

"Do you mean that you're not willing to come with me—into the desert?"

His voice had changed, harshened. It held a fierce, imperative demand before which she quailed. All at once it became clear to her, hideously, paralyzingly clear—the renunciation he was asking of her. It would mean the sacrifice of the whole of life as she knew it—all the joys and luxuries of civilization, the companionship of friends, the accustomed daily interests of art and literature and politics, the entire fabric of existence with which she was familiar. There would be just himself and her—alone in the world, a world emptied of everything which used to fill it. They must needs be all-sufficing to each other. She shrank instinctively from such a prospect. As though he divined that shrinking, as though her spirit had sent some tangible gesture of withdrawal through the slender body in his arms, he released her suddenly.

"You don't love me," he said slowly. "You don't love me enough for that."

She was conscious of shame, of bitter dismay. She could not understand her own complex emotions. Even her love itself seemed to have failed her, powerless to overcome her utter recoil from the life he offered her, her shrinking dread and abhorrence of it.

"I—don't—think—I do," she said drearily.

For an instant there was a dead silence. Then the storm broke—a storm of such concentrated anger and contempt that it seemed to beat up round her like some concrete thing. Kerry's bitter words were like so many blows falling upon

her body. Her hands flew up to her eyes to shut out the sight of his white, tempest-ravaged face.

"Don't! Don't!" she burst out at last, in a tortured voice. "Kerry—you can't have loved me, either—to speak like this!"

"Not loved you! I worshipped you!" He drew nearer her, his eyes compelling her own flinching ones to meet them. "I loved you with every fibre of my being. When you told me, that day in the Forest, that you believed in me—believed in me when there was no earthly reason why you should believe, no shred of evidence to help your faith—I could have fallen at your feet and kissed them."

"Yet you jeered at me," she reminded him swiftly. "Mocked my belief."

"I did it in self-defence. I *dare* not say what I felt—let you see how much your trust signified to me. When a man has had his whole life wrecked on a false accusation, an accusation which he was helpless to disprove, can you imagine what it meant to find that the woman he had already learned to love believed in him—trusted him fearlessly without a shadow of proof? . . . And now—God! Are you the same woman? You, who shy at a few hardships! Is that your love? Something that must be lapped in comfort, bolstered up with the tuppenny-halfpenny round of conventional society! Good Lord! . . . Do you know what I had purposed for us—how I had looked at things? I thought we should go together, man and mate, out into the wide, clean spaces of the world, and build our life there as men and women have done before, and make a big thing of it. And you—you who've been so fine all through—you're not *game*! You cling to all that rotten shibboleth you've been brought up to. And you put it in the place of love!"

"You're not fair, Kerry," she answered swiftly. She was mastering herself now. That sick horror which had overwhelmed her under his scourging wrath had passed, and her own anger was rising to meet his. "You're not fair! Since

our engagement you've never spoken, never hinted at such a thing as that we should live a kind of backwoods life. I supposed—*naturally* I supposed—that now that there was nothing to drive you abroad you would remain here. You know what sort of woman I am, the manner of life I've lived, and yet without a word from me, without a question, you assume that I'm ready and willing to live with you—on a farm—in Rhodesia!" She paused, then thrust again. "Do I *look* the type of person who would be living on a farm in Rhodesia?"

He stared at her with sullen, brooding eyes—at the slight figure, all woman in its slender roundness, at the dark, satiny hair, brushed by a maid till it gleamed like the wing of a raven, at the white, fine-grained hands with softly shining nails—hands that no manual work had ever coarsened. Last of all, his glance absorbed the simple line and finish of her clothes, inalienably stamped with the distinctiveness of the woman who has both taste and money and, having combined the two in the matter of her dress, promptly forgets all about it. The enormity of what he was asking of her came home to him. But it made not the slightest difference. If she loved him, she must be ready to forego all else.

"No," he admitted. "You don't look like it. What then?"

"Well——" She gazed at him in despair, hopeless of making him ever understand. He wasn't even trying to understand. He was simply waiting—as he had waited on other occasions—for her to surrender, to yield her will to his, no matter what it cost her. A wave of passionate anger surged over her.

"Kerry, it's too much to ask of me—of any woman! It's too big a sacrifice."

He studied her face for a moment in silence, his own hardening slowly until it looked as though it had been carved in stone.

"That final?" he asked impassively.

She nodded silently. Her lips felt dry, her throat constricted. She knew as well as though he had pronounced sentence that this meant the end—the end of everything between them. Without a word, without even looking at her again, he turned and went out of the hall, and a minute later she heard the house-door close behind him as he strode out into the night.

She stood quite still where he had left her, staring blindly in front of her. She felt numb, stunned by the realization of what had happened. Kerry and she, so utterly happy in their love! . . . And now it was over—finished.

Sweet and bitter, bitter and sweet—they had been strangely intermingled in the past. But there would be no such mingling in the future. Henceforth her life would hold only bitterness—the bitterness of remembrance.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PRICE

IN the solitude of her own room Patricia surrendered to the flood of contradictory emotions which swept over her. At the back of everything stood the bleak, desolating fact of her utter severance from Kerry, but around it eddied the cross-currents of half a dozen different emotions, warring with each other—resentment that he should so arrogantly have assumed her readiness to go with him into the wilds, anger at his inability to look at the matter from any other point of view than his own, and, side by side with her overwhelming repugnance to the mode of life he offered her, an irritated feeling of self-contempt that the question of environment should sway her to such an extent that it could even wipe the radiance from the face of love itself. And above and over all flamed her woman's indignant pride that rather than forego his own will, rather than yield an inch of his set purpose, he could so determinedly give her up—renounce all that she and their mutual love had meant to him.

If Kerry had done what many another man would have done in similar circumstances—what Mark Strown most certainly would have done—if he had taken her in his arms and soothed and heartened her, given her the chance to accustom herself gradually to the idea of the new life, let her see how intensely he craved for the untrammelled freedom he had grown to love, matters might have ended very differently between them. Above all, if he had only shown her his infinite need of her, then that absolute surrender of self, that instinct for sacrifice, which is the bedrock upon which all women's love is founded, would have solved the whole

problem, and she would have gone with him, recklessly laying everything that counted in life upon love's altar.

But he had done none of these things. Instead, he had taken it for granted that she would be ready to follow him to the world's end and beyond, had discounted all the values which a woman, reared in an environment of luxury, must inevitably attach to the graces of civilization, and had let his whole scheme for their future life together come upon her as an unqualified shock.

It was typical of the man—and typical, too, his reception of her refusal. The Kerry who now, without a further word of reasoning or persuasion, haughtily renounced all claim on her was the same disdainful, headlong Kerry who, ten years ago, when his own kith and kin had failed him in another way, had simply taken himself off and lived his life alone.

And it was equally characteristic of Patricia that when he tried to force her to his way of thinking, bend her will to his, she should have resisted him. If he had appealed to her, he might have won her round. But his arrogant assumption that her submission was a foregone conclusion, his imperious sweeping aside of her objections as though they were hardly worth consideration, had struck against the streak of pride in her and had locked the gates of her heart.

She reflected bitterly upon the long chain of links which had led at last to this final consummation—a chain stretching away into the past years of an old man's tyranny, of which the bitter fruit had been the silence of Jonathan Mathers and the exile of an innocent man. True, Marchdale had paid—paid in the fierce blow to his pride of blood and in years of secret grief and loneliness. But the account was not yet squared. The full price would have to be paid by the woman Kerry loved.

Only two ways were open to her. Either she must forego everything that had hitherto made life sweet and gracious to her, crush down all the instincts and demands which her whole environment had helped to emphasize, and shoulder

the burden of the pioneer—a burden which presses heavily enough upon the brave women who carry it—or she must renounce all that love, and the fulfilment of love, might hold.

With a little moan of anguish Patricia slipped to her knees beside the bed and buried her face on her arms. The light of her happiness had failed suddenly, and she was alone in utter darkness. Before, when circumstances had combined to force her and Kerry apart, she had found it easier to endure. But now, after these few days of complete and perfect happiness it had become a thousand times more hard. This time it was not alone the sadness of severance which she had to face. If something altogether outside their own control had separated them—if, even, Kerry had died—there would have been a tender sweetness in all the memories she held—something that might have comforted and consoled her.

But now there was nothing that could either help or sustain her. The remembrance of to-day would be always of the fierce clash of opposing natures, of the hopeless misunderstanding of each other's view-point which had arisen between them, and of Kerry's bitter contempt for her because she lacked the courage to go with him and face life in the raw. A long, quivering sob forced its way between her lips, but no tears came to her relief. Motionless and dry-eyed she knelt on, sunk in a dull stupor of misery.

How long she knelt there she did not know, but presently the distant booming of the dressing-gong startled her back into realization of the fact that she must dress for dinner—that to-night was carnival night.

Carnival! As she rose slowly from her knees she wondered if anyone in the world had ever felt less like taking part in a carnival. The mockery of it stung like the cut of a whip. But there was no alternative. She could not possibly allow her private griefs to mar the evening for everybody else. She must smother her own feelings and appear on the lake just as though nothing had happened—as though she were still the happy woman she had been only a few hours

earlier. She set her teeth and began grimly to make her preparations for the evening.

Presently, as she moved about the room, the ironical thought obtruded itself that here was one of the penalties exacted by civilized life. In the wilderness, she supposed, you laughed when you were happy and cried when you were sad. There was nothing to prevent you from being entirely natural and spontaneous. But it was one of the conventions of civilization that no matter how much your heart ached, no matter how heavy the burden of sorrow which weighed you down, you must contrive to appear in public with a smile, and be ready to play your part as gaily as everyone else. It seemed that the kind of life which Kerry craved had certain advantages, after all.

With the thought of Kerry came a startled fear as to what he proposed to do to-night. He had gone out, as she knew, instinctively seeking to face matters in the open air—amid the spaces that he loved. Would he return in time for dinner—pay that much deference to the usages of Strangways? Or would he stay away—fighting his agony out alone under the starlit skies? If he elected not to return, there would be surmises, questions asked which she would find it difficult to parry.

And even if he returned she had no idea what line of conduct he would choose to assume—what attitude he would adopt towards herself. The uncertainty worried her. For Kit's sake, she was anxious that the break between herself and Kerry should be concealed until the following day, so that he and Nancy might have their eagerly anticipated carnival unclouded by the troubles of others. Spurred by the thought, she rang for her maid, determined to dress early. If Kerry had returned, she would intercept him before dinner and arrange with him that for to-night, at least, their relative attitude towards each other should remain outwardly unchanged.

To Patricia, nerves on edge to get downstairs, her maid

seemed unusually slow this evening in the performance of her duties. She could have shaken her. But at last her toilette was accomplished, and she hurried out of her room and along the corridor. Leaning over the gallery above the hall, she peered down, and with a throb of relief perceived Kerry sitting alone by the fire. He had returned, then! Her worst fears were set at rest.

But now that she knew that he was there, her feet lagged, and she descended the stairs reluctantly, wishing she could postpone the coming interview. At last she reached the hall and, crossing it, emerged into the circle of light about the hearth.

Kerry rose at her approach, and she glanced up at him timidly, dreading what she might see in his face. But she need have had no fears. He looked perfectly composed. Perhaps he was rather paler than usual, but his glance, as it swept her slender figure from head to foot, was devoid of any particular expression, either of contempt or anger. It was just the cool gaze a man might level at a woman who meant nothing to him—never had meant anything, and never would.

“Won’t you sit down?” he said perfunctorily, pulling forward a chair.

“No—no, thank you,” she returned, faltering nervously. “Kerry, I—I wanted to—to speak to you.”

For an instant there sprang into his eyes a swift look of surprise—of surprise and something more. Then it vanished, leaving his gaze as impenetrable as before.

“Yes?” he said interrogatively.

“It was about—about to-night,” she stammered. She felt overwhelmed, tongue-tied. Anger, contempt, scorn—she had steeled herself to meet these. But this cool detachment, this quiet, perfectly polite neutrality—she had not anticipated this, and it found her unprepared.

“Yes?” he repeated encouragingly. “What about to-night?”

"Only that I don't want us—I don't wish our——" She stopped confusedly and began again. "I couldn't bear to spoil Kit's carnival by—by letting him see—guess that we——" Again she halted. At last, desperately, she got it out: "Will you—couldn't we behave to-night as though nothing had happened—just so as not to spoil the evening for other people?"

He raised his brows slightly.

"I never had the remotest intention of doing anything else," he replied quietly. "Of course, we can't spoil Kit's show to-night."

She gave a little gasp of mingled relief and astonishment. She had hardly expected Kerry to evince the least concern for anyone else's affairs. But evidently she had misjudged him. It was only for her that he had no sympathy, could make no concessions, she reflected bitterly.

"And—and to-morrow?" she faltered.

Again that slight, mocking lift of his brows.

"To-morrow?" he said lightly. "Oh, surely we can leave to-morrow to take care of itself?"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE ICE CARNIVAL

OVERHEAD in the cloudless sky sailed a big, silver moon, shining down benevolently, like some good fairy godmother, upon the gay and sparkling scene of carnival on Strangways lake. The Chinese lanterns had been lit and were burning steadily in the still air, ringing the steel-grey sheet of frozen water with a circle of brightly coloured lights. Here and there a huge bonfire blazed aloft, thrusting up quivering tongues of orange flame and throwing a ruddy glow across the ice, while the sharp crackle of burning wood and snapping sticks mingled merrily with the festive strains of the band and the snatches of animated talk and laughter which drifted back and forth as the skaters flashed hither and thither across the lake's glittering surface.

Invitations to the carnival had been issued on a generous scale, and the lake was thronged. Perhaps there were a few uninvited guests, but no one minded. Even Lord Marchdale smiled good-humouredly and looked the other way when he discerned a handful of cheery little urchins from the village darting in and out like young eels amongst the well-dressed crowd. For the most part, though, they kept discreetly to the higher end of the lake, where the ice was rougher and not in such good condition, while skilfully avoiding the stretch of unsound ice—where a stream entered the lake—which a notice-board announced to be unsafe.

Kit and Nancy were in uproarious spirits and played a leading part in the evening's amusement, organizing races and figure-skating competitions, dances, and, in fact, every form of entertainment on the ice which would allow itself

to be organized. Patricia smiled wistfully to herself once or twice as she watched their riotous satisfaction in the whole affair. Her own heart was very heavy, and she felt as though a gulf of years separated her from these two light-hearted young creatures, buzzing about the lake, and infecting everyone with whom they came in contact with their own bubbling sense of fun and enjoyment. Everyone except herself—and one other. She knew well enough that Kerry was extracting no pleasure from the proceedings, although to the uninitiated he probably appeared to be doing so, as he skated with first one and then another of the numerous guests, the rising generation of whom were making his acquaintance for the first time.

Probably a certain curiosity to meet the returned prodigal had conduced to the large number of acceptances which had followed the issue of invitations from the castle. The actual circumstances attending Kerry's abrupt departure from England ten years before were, of course, unknown to the general public, but all the county was aware that it had been in consequence of a terrific quarrel with the Earl. And now that he had returned he was invested with a halo of romance, and more than one youthful feminine heart beat the faster when its owner found herself skating in company with the tall, bronzed man whose rather weary grey eyes and somewhat cynical speech set her wondering tremulously what history of broken hopes lay hidden in his past.

With the same cool air of detachment with which he had greeted her before dinner, Kerry skated several times with Patricia. He was a magnificent performer on the ice, whilst she herself, owing to lack of opportunity, was a very indifferent one. Precisely as in India, before they had ever learned to care for each other, he might have advised her how to secure a more accurate shot with her rifle, or how better to manage a recalcitrant pony, so now he proceeded to instruct her methodically in the art of skating. His air of detachment was so complete that it gave her a queer feeling of un-

reality. It made that last passionate scene between them appear almost incredible, dream-like.

How could any man who had loved and renounced a woman only a few hours before composedly concentrate his mind upon teaching her how to skate? It was like a denial of all that had ever been between them. The clasp of his hands on hers as they skimmed the ice together was sheer agony—it was so utterly indifferent, lacking all the magic of love's touch. Although they were actually side by side, hands linked and shoulder brushing shoulder as they sped along, she felt as if he had set her a great way off from him—so far away that no bridge could ever span the distance between them. The remembrance of the dream she had once had returned to her with overwhelming vividness—of the solitary place in which she had wandered, and of the shrouded figure which had bidden her choose. Well, she had chosen, and the words she had heard in her dream recurred to her mind like some dread prophecy: "*You will seek for the desert places of the world in vain.*"

. . . She was glad when presently Kerry steered her back to the edge of the lake, where Kit and Nancy immediately claimed her to impart some gorgeous new plan which had occurred to them for augmenting the fun of the evening. She felt she could not have endured that cold, unfamiliar touch of Kerry's a moment longer, nor the chill indifference of his voice. It sent a stab of fresh pain through her heart to hear, a moment later, the warmth come back into his tones as he responded to a merry hail from Peggy Bethune.

"Mr. Lorimer, you're neglecting a new friend shamefully," she challenged him gaily. "What have I done that you should so pointedly ignore my existence all evening? I skate quite nicely—really I do!"

He smiled down into her mirthful face.

"I'm sure of it," he answered. "I've already had ocular demonstration of the fact. You were cutting such wonderful

figures in that first competition that I've felt altogether too modest to ask you to skate with the likes of me."

She shook her head reprovingly.

"Was a man ever without an excuse—since the time when Adam laid the whole blame of that unfortunate orchard incident on poor Eve's shoulders?"

"Probably not," he agreed gravely. "These things are hereditary, you know. So won't you exercise your feminine prerogative of forgiveness?" He held out his hands persuasively and, slipping hers within them, they glided away together.

"You know," she said laughingly, as they flashed along, "you're the 'big noise' here this evening. All the women who haven't been introduced to you already are dying to be—so naturally I want to flaunt my prior acquaintance with you in their faces."

He slackened speed a little.

"But why on earth should they be interested in me?" he asked with honest astonishment. "I'm no lady's man, heaven knows!"—with a short laugh.

Peggy nodded her head at him like a pert robin.

"Probably that's half the attraction," she replied shrewdly. "Women always hanker after what they can't understand—and there's a kind of mysterious glamour attached to the wanderer returned, you know. Besides, a touch of the misogynist in a man brings us all to our knees. We think it so clever of him to have found us out."

She rattled on gaily and gradually led the conversation by some circuitous route to the subject of his engagement.

"When is it going to be announced to the world at large?" she asked. "It's only fair to the people who may be in danger of losing their hearts to one or other of you that they should be informed there's a prior claim. As for me, I've been reserving my congratulations ever since I first guessed the state of affairs."

Kerry hesitated a moment. Then he answered quietly:

"I think, perhaps, you had better reserve them a little longer."

She glanced up at him curiously.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Pat must be given time to consider things," he replied. "Possibly it might not appeal to her to return abroad with me. She is so fond of England."

He spoke quite deliberately. There was only one last service he could perform for the woman he loved, and that he was determined to do. He could at least shield her a little from the awkwardness and questions which would infallibly ensue when it became known to their intimate circle that the engagement between them was at an end. His old allegiance to Stewart Luttrell, his former chief, would have prompted him to this end, in any case. But, beyond that, he had done a good deal of hard thinking since his afternoon's interview with Patricia, and although nothing would ever alter his view of the big matter which stood betwixt them as man and woman, he had no wish that she should suffer the hundred and one pin-pricks which are added to the lot of the feminine participator in a broken engagement. It is invariably the woman who meets the subsequent rough edges. He himself was going away—out of it all. It mattered little or nothing what people said or thought about his share in the affair. But it would matter very considerably to Patricia, who would be left behind to face the music.

"To return abroad with you?" repeated Peggy in astonishment. "But surely you're not thinking of living abroad after you are married?"

"Surely I'm not thinking of living anywhere else," he rejoined, smiling slightly. "I'm far too much of a savage to settle down in these ultra-civilized parts."

Peggy was silent, thinking rapidly.

"I suppose you would go back to India, then?" she said.

"No. India doesn't call me any longer, now that Lut-

trell's gone. I want to go farming in Rhodesia. That's the best kind of life for a man."

"For a man—yes," said Peggy quickly. "But what sort of life is it for a woman?"

"A bit rough, I'm afraid," he acknowledged.

"And for a woman brought up as Pat has been—Mr. Lorimer, it's madness!" She wheeled to a halt and, disengaging her hands from his grasp, stood facing him.

"Do you think so?" he said slowly. "It's always been my notion of an ideal life—man and wife and the homestead, and God's open spaces round them."

"Open fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Peggy scornfully. "Mr. Lorimer, I ask you, can you picture Pat on a farm—in your ridiculous 'homestead'?"

"I've pictured it a good many times," he answered quietly. She laid her hand impulsively on his arm.

"And have you pictured the expression you will see on her face after a year or two of it?" she asked.

"You think it won't be a happy one? Is that it?"

"I don't think. I *know*. How could she be happy there—Pat, who loves everything soft and fine and beautiful, who has been used to a dozen or more servants waiting on her since babyhood? Oh, I tell you, if you don't give up this crazy idea, you'll smash the happiness of both of you. You've had your 'wander-year'—a good many wander-years, in fact. Make up your mind to settle down in England now."

He made a gesture of refusal.

"I can't do that," he said. "As you say, I've had a good many wander-years, and now the craving for freedom is in my blood."

"Then give up Pat! You can trek about the outlandish places of the world, alone, as much as you please, but you've no right to drag a woman with you. Certainly not a woman like Pat, who needs all the lovely things of life that a man can give her." Vividly in Peggy's mind was the thought of one particular man who loved Patricia and who could give

her all these things. She had recognized the opportunity offered by Lorimer's decision, and now she was fighting hard for Mark's happiness. "You've no right to demand such a sacrifice from any woman," she ended indignantly.

"You have a very clear and concise way of putting things," observed Kerry, dryly, after a pause.

"Ah, forgive me!" she returned, warm-heartedly repentant. "I didn't mean to hurt you. But I can't—I can't see Pat happy in the kind of life which you're proposing she should lead."

For a moment he was silent. Then he spoke with a curious deliberation, as of a man who has come to some decision.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Bethune," he said gravely. "I shall never ask—or accept—a sacrifice from Pat. . . . That's why I told you you had better reserve your felicitations a little longer," he went on more lightly. "They may not be needed. Shall we take another turn round the lake?"

He held out his hands and soon they were mingling once more with the throng of skaters. Peggy's heart beat excitedly. It seemed as though, after all, there were a possibility that Mark might yet find his happiness with the woman he loved. She had at least the consolation of knowing that she had done her utmost to compass it, although, when presently she and Kerry separated, her thoughts followed him with genuine regret. At the same time, it was her honest belief that Patricia would be utterly miserable in the environment he proposed to give her. Otherwise, not even for her brother's sake, would she have meddled quite so flagrantly.

The evening wore on. People went in and out of the supper tent, allaying with the medley of good things provided by the Strangways *chef* the pangs of a really sharp hunger born of exercise in the keen night air, the band still played with unflagging enthusiasm, and the fun rose fast and furious. Coloured paper streamers flew through the air,

entangling the unwary in their coils, confetti sparkled in the flare of the bonfires like the dust of falling stars, while the sharp percussion of squibs and crackers rattled above the lake like miniature gunfire. And then, all at once, swift as the pounce of a hawk, came imminent, unlooked-for danger—the sudden hazard of life and death.

One moment there was only the rippling mirth of the merry-makers to be heard, the lively hum of talk and laughter—the next, across the lighthearted babble tore the grinding crash of splitting ice, shrieks and cries for help, while at the upper end of the lake was visible a confused huddle of boyish figures and a dark, ominous gash in the frozen surface of the water.

Patricia, standing on the bank talking to Mark Strown and drinking coffee, swung round in horror. She saw the skaters nearest to the scene of the catastrophe surge forward, then stop and hesitate as they reached the zone of treacherous ice. In the same instant, it seemed, a figure drew clear from amongst them, flying ahead like the wind, regardless of the rotten surface . . . a tall, loose-limbed figure . . .

“Kerry!” Her cup fell from her hands with a clatter of breaking china, and she stumbled headlong down the bank. Gaining the ice, she raced madly towards the further end of the lake.

What happened after that was like a nightmare—swift and terrifying and horribly confused. Someone—a man she did not know—caught her as she approached the danger zone and held her firmly.

“You can’t go there! It isn’t safe. . . . Someone’s bringing a rope and ladder. They’ll have them out in a jiffy.”

She struggled in the unknown’s grasp, hardly getting the sense of his words, straining her eyes in a fruitless endeavour to locate Kerry’s tall figure. Then everything seemed to swim before her, the tangle of hurrying figures grew blurred and indistinct, and she reeled, hanging helplessly in the arms that supported her. A flask of brandy was held to her lips,

and as the raw spirit burned its way down her throat she came gulpingly back to the consciousness of fresh stir and movement as people moved quietly aside, voices hushed, to make way for a small, dread procession—four men walking with steady, even tread and carrying a hurdle on which lay Kerry's body, his upturned face pallidly white in the moonlight, while on his temple, below the dripping hair lying dankly streaked across his forehead, showed a small purplish bruise.

Arose a low hubbub of frightened question and answer.

"What's happened? Is someone hurt? Who is it?"

"It's Kerry Lorimer. . . . Two of the boys went through when the ice gave way. . . . Yes, he got 'em both out—but the ice gave again under his weight, and one of the lads struggled and struck him on the head with his skate. . . . He sank at once, of course . . . stunned. Thought they'd never get him out. . . . Killed? Can't say, I'm sure. Near thing, anyway. . . . There goes the doctor—Beresford, isn't it?" The words cut their way into Patricia's numbed brain, waking it to agonized life.

Killed! Kerry—*killed*! And only a few hours ago she had refused to go with him to Rhodesia—refused because there weren't enough comfortable arm-chairs to be had in the wilds of South Africa! That was how she phrased it to herself in the passion of wild remorse and self-reproach that overwhelmed her.

Kerry . . . dead! It wasn't true. God couldn't be so cruel! As she pressed forward amongst the crowd, seeking for someone who could reassure her, disperse this nightmare of terror which had enveloped her, her lips were moving in a voiceless agony of entreaty.

"God! Don't let him be killed! Make it not true. . . . Let him be only stunned. Yes, that's it—stunned, stunned!"

At last she found herself amongst familiar faces. Lady Mary, wan as a storm-beaten snowdrop, clinging to Bernard Waybrant's arm; the Earl, standing next Strown, with a

face that had grown suddenly lined and ashen—ashen even in the mocking rosy light of the leaping bonfires; Kit and Nancy, together with Peggy Bethune, all huddled together at the entrance to the tent. Kerry had been carried inside and the doctor was with him. The minutes dragged by leaden-footed. With straining eyes Patricia watched the figure bending above that prone one on the hurdle. At last the doctor straightened himself.

“Get him up to the house as quickly as possible,” he said. “Go steady, men!” he added sharply, as the hurdle was lifted from the ground and the terrible little procession reformed. Patricia’s lips felt stiff and dry. She could not even force them into utterance of the question which clamoured at her heart. It was Lady Mary who found courage to ask in shaking tones: “Will he live, doctor?”

Beresford’s keen, clever face grew wonderfully soft as he met the aching anxiety of her lifted eyes. But he gave her the truth.

“It’s impossible to say—yet,” he answered. “He’s alive now. Under God, I’ll try and keep him so.”

There was just a gleam of hope, then! Patricia snatched at it. Kerry would live—he *must* live! And if he lived she would count no sacrifice on earth too great to make for him. She would tramp the world barefoot at his side, if needs be.

God—let him live! Dear God—let him live!

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CRUCIAL TEST

KERRY would live! The long, interminable hours—days—of strain were over at last. Patricia had prayed till she was exhausted, slept, and wakened only to pray again, to ask the same monotonous question at the sick-room door and receive the same reply: "There is still danger. Complications may occur." But now, at length, the cautious medical mind pronounced further risk as negligible. Even the danger of pneumonia had been safely tided over and in a day or two Kerry would be downstairs and amongst them all again.

Meanwhile, Patricia had only been allowed to see him for a few minutes at a time, and as the nurse had remained in the room all the while there had been no possibility of telling him—what she longed to tell—that she was willing now to go with him to Rhodesia—or anywhere else on this planet so long as they were together. In any case, these first brief visits would not have offered an appropriate moment in which to broach the subject, for Kerry was not in a condition to be troubled by anything that partook of a disturbing or exciting nature.

So Patricia had perforce to restrain her impatient longing to rid herself of the burden of remorse which pressed so heavily upon her, to have everything clear and straight between them once more, and know that at last all the pitiful misunderstandings of the past had been swept away for ever.

But she was not wholly unhappy during this period of enforced waiting. Deep in her heart she was conscious of a warm glow of happiness—the glow that comes with the joy of giving to someone beloved. And side by side with that secret joy was a deep, abiding thanksgiving that her eyes

had been opened in time—that she had learned, before it was too late, how little any sacrifice counted when weighed in the scales against love.

Aglow with the knowledge that was locked within her breast, it came upon her as a shock—something almost in the nature of a cold douche—to find, when Kerry was finally released from his bedroom and promoted to the sun-parlour, that his attitude towards her was unchanged—calmly detached and polite as it had been on the night of the ice carnival. The difference from his former manner was not sufficiently marked for anyone to notice it, however. Moreover, his temperature had a trick of running up and down rather unexpectedly, and by the doctor's orders he had still to be kept fairly quiet, his meals served to him alone in the sun-parlour, and visitors strictly limited as to time. Thus there was little opportunity for the various members of the household to observe closely any alteration in his manner towards Patricia.

But to her the difference was abundantly clear, and once or twice she thought that Nancy had glanced rather curiously from one to the other of them, as though her ears, attuned to the inflection of a man's voice when he speaks to the woman he loves, detected something alien and incomprehensible.

In this way, several days elapsed before Patricia could summon courage to touch upon the subject so near to her heart. Very rarely could she count upon more than a few minutes alone with Kerry, and on those occasions that courteous neutrality of his seemed like an invisible curtain between them—a barrier which she had no means of breaking down. She had tried more than once to approach the matter, to explain, but he had adroitly checked her, whether by accident or design she hardly knew. Sometimes it seemed to her as though he were intentionally misunderstanding her, evading of set purpose her faltering efforts towards reconciliation.

But one afternoon her opportunity came. Everyone was to be out, and before she departed on the business which called her away—some kindly errand of mercy to an old servant who had fallen on hard times—Lady Mary had confided Kerry to Patricia's care.

"I don't need to tell you to look after him well," she had said, smiling. "Go and sit with him, my dear. I'm afraid you've had very little opportunity of being alone with him since his accident."

Accordingly, a little later on Patricia made her way to the sun-parlour, armed with fresh flowers for the vases there—she felt an imperative need of some sort of tangible excuse for her visit. Kerry was lying on the couch when she entered, a very badly cut leg, for which Beresford had prescribed as much rest as possible, being amongst the injuries he had sustained on the carnival night. He rose at her entrance, and, seeing her purpose, proceeded to lift down from their various niches the bowls and vases with which she kept the room gay, then stood silently by the fire, watching her as she removed yesterday's blooms and began to refill the vases with fresh ones. His silence and the consciousness that he was watching her frayed her nerves a trifle.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked at last in desperation, unable to bear the heavy silence any longer.

"I was thinking that you do that very charmingly," he answered lightly.

"Anyone can arrange flowers," she returned, clipping recklessly at the long stems of some chrysanthemums.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"On the contrary. Some people merely herd them together."

She laughed rather nervously.

"I've had a lot of practice. Perhaps that explains it," she suggested. "I always arranged all the flowers at the Residency, you know."

He regarded her contemplatively.

"It would certainly be a waste to bury such a talent in the backwoods." The comment, with its palpable sneer, seemed to have escaped him almost unawares. He looked annoyed with himself the instant the words had crossed his lips. But it is not always easy to crush down every sign of a deep and underlying bitterness.

The big golden chrysanthemums she was handling dropped from her fingers as she turned abruptly and faced him.

"Kerry," she said, her lips white. "I want to ask your forgiveness for the other day. I was—mad, I think."

For a moment a new look leaped into his eyes. If it had lasted an instant longer she could have sworn that it held an unspeakable gladness. But it passed as swiftly as it had come, leaving his gaze remote and impenetrable as it had been before.

"There can be no question of forgiveness between you and me," he returned, unmoved.

A great fear clutched at her heart.

"Then you can't—you won't—forgive me?" she faltered.

"The question doesn't arise," he said. "It isn't a matter for forgiveness. I asked you to be my wife and to go with me to Rhodesia. You exercised your right as a woman to refuse my proposal. That's all."

"No!" she broke out passionately. "It is not all. I refused to go with you, I know. The idea was so new—it frightened me. It meant giving up everything I'd grown used to—everything I valued. But—but the other night—when I nearly lost you . . . Oh, Kerry! I knew then that I was ready to make any sacrifice for you!" She held out her hands. "Won't you—please—try to forgive me and—and take me with you to Rhodesia?"

She looked very young and appealing as she stood there with outstretched arms, her eyes pleading for her far more eloquently than her halting words. He made a quick movement towards her, then checked himself abruptly, while his hands slowly clenched.

"No," he said quietly. "I will not." He turned away, but she came nearer to him and laid her hands entreatingly on his arm.

"Kerry, you are horribly cruel." Her voice shook, but she went on: "Am I to be judged and condemned for one hour's weakness? I've regretted it—bitterly enough—since. And I'm ready to go with you now—to the world's end." But he only stared down at her in sombre silence, and suddenly she snatched her hands from his arm, a flood of shamed colour staining her face scarlet. "Or have you ceased to care? Perhaps"—with a swift, proud bitterness—"I'm offering you what you no longer want! Is that it?" She laughed unevenly. "Tell me. You needn't be afraid to tell me."

"No," he said curtly. "It's not that. But—I accept no sacrifice from the woman I love. I told you once before, we play level."

"Then it's your pride!" she exclaimed swiftly. "You're letting it come between us again."

"No," he said sternly. "It's not pride. But you and I look at love differently. You say you're ready now to make any sacrifice for me—ready to come with me. And I say I don't want you on those terms. Can you tell me—truthfully—that you would never regret, never wish for those things you are offering to give up? . . . You can't. And so long as it means 'giving up,' it isn't love. If you really loved, it wouldn't be a sacrifice to come with me. It would be the only thing you could do. . . . It would be a sacrifice to hold on to all these rotten little society conventions."

She looked at him with startled eyes.

"I *want* to come with you," she answered quickly. "You don't believe me."

"But you will be sacrificing something—a great deal—if you come. And that fact would stand between us—always. If you could tell me—honestly and sincerely—that to leave England and live a primitive life with me in South

'Africa signified no sacrifice to you, no renunciation you would be making—for me, I'd take you. We'd go together.' His voice vibrated with some strong pressure he was putting on himself.

"Let me come!" she implored impetuously.

He turned her face up to him, cupping it betwixt his two hands, and looked down at her with eyes that seemed to burn their way into her very soul.

"Can you tell me—that it would not be a sacrifice?" he said.

She opened her lips to answer. She would assure him, never let him know what she herself knew in the inmost heart of her—that it *would* mean a sacrifice, mean a renunciation that would need all her strength to make. But she was willing to make it. Only he mustn't know. And then, with those compelling eyes searching her face, she found she could not answer—could not give him the half-truth that would bridge the gulf between them. A burning flush covered her face. Her eyes still bore his scrutiny, honestly and unflinchingly, but slowly the agony she was enduring grew in them—the agony of admitting by her silence that truth which would take him from her.

"You see?" he said, releasing her. "I was right. So that settles it."

He smiled very slightly—a rather weary smile. She thought she read disappointment in it—the bitter disappointment and contempt of a man who realizes that when put to the test the woman he loves has failed him.

It was true. She had failed him—failed him, as she reflected bleakly, because she could not bring herself to lie convincingly, because she had been honest with herself and him. She turned and, with bent head, went slowly out of the room.

"*You will seek for the desert places of the world in vain*"—the words drummed in her ears. The dream prophecy had found a swift and terrible fulfilment.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTERWARDS

CHRISTMAS had come and gone. Subsequently, in slow procession, the bleak months of winter had dragged themselves away, and now at last, with the coming of April, there was a real feeling of spring in the air—capricious and fugitive it might be, alternating disconcertingly from sunshine to rain, but still, for all that, definitely spring, with sap bubbling upward in the trees, branches newly pointed with tiny, uncurled buds, and the glades of the Forest sprinkled over with primrose and daffodil. The whole earth had awakened to fresh life.

But for Patricia there was no corresponding uprush of new being. The dreariness of winter had closed down upon her heart without hope of ever lifting. It seemed years, a lifetime almost, since Kerry had gone away, and in his going taken her whole happiness with him. He had left Strangways almost immediately after his refusal to accept her proffered sacrifice, treating the doctor's grave warnings as to the risks he was thus inviting with a careless indifference that was thoroughly characteristic.

"You're not fit to travel from here to London, let alone further afield," Beresford had told him finally. "It's simply asking for trouble."

Kerry had regarded him with grimly ironical eyes.

"And if I stay here, it's getting trouble without asking for it," he had replied. And something in the curtly uttered speech had checked the shrewd-faced doctor from attempting any further to dissuade him.

What explanation Kerry had given to the Earl and Lady Mary Patricia never knew, but that he had shielded her to the

utmost of his power she was convinced by their unchanged affection for her.

Lady Mary had kissed her with a warm tenderness that brought a lump into her throat.

"My dear," she said, "of course it is a great grief to us that your engagement is broken off. But it's better you and Kerry should find out that you had made a mistake now rather than after marriage. That would have been a tragedy."

"I hate feeling I've driven him away from you all—so soon after he had come back," Patricia had answered. "I feel that I ought to have been the one to go. I'm the cuckoo in the nest," she added with a somewhat wistful smile.

But the Dresden China Lady was quite decided upon that point.

"You're my very dear daughter," she returned affectionately. "And I should never spare you except to go to a home of your own. Besides, in any case, we couldn't have kept Kerry here for long. His love of solitudes is too deeply ingrained. But he will come back to see us sometimes, when all this has blown over. After all, he hasn't gone very far as yet! His last letter was only written from Brihou Island."

Patricia made no answer. At the moment Brihou Island seemed to her as remote as the Antipodes.

"And now," pursued Lady Mary, "we have at least the happiness of knowing that he has never been unworthy—never once fallen below the high standard of the Wynsboroughs."

Lord Marchdale himself had dismissed the matter with a gruff: "My dear, I've had so many disappointments in life that one more or less won't break me. Thank God, the boy's been proved straight as a die. That's all that really matters."

To the old people the knowledge that Kerry's record was clean, that they were free to take him to their hearts again,

almost compensated for his absence. They had grown used to living without him, and although they had openly rejoiced in the prospect of his marrying Patricia and living near them, old age, with the long discipline of life behind it, learns to surrender its hopes without making overmuch fuss about the matter.

A new interest, too, helped to divert their thoughts from brooding upon what might have been. Kit and Nancy's wedding was fixed to take place in May, and now that the time was drawing near there were so many things to see to and arrange that the days seemed to fly by. The Dower House had been entirely redecorated from top to bottom, and the process of refurnishing was already in full swing. Many beautiful pieces of old Chippendale and Sheraton found their way from the overstocked resources of the castle to the Dower House, and almost daily Kit and Patricia walked across there, where Nancy would meet them, in order to supervise their transference, or to watch the restoration of beautiful old chimney-pieces, long neglected, or sometimes to lend a hand with the actual cleaning and polishing of old Jacobean panelling which the damp and dust of years had robbed of its warm lustre.

Very often Peggy and her brother, or the Rector himself, would put in an appearance, only to be promptly set to work by an increasingly house-proud Kit. No one who crossed the threshold of the Dower House during these fevered days was allowed to eat the bread of idleness—although a very desirable picnic lunch always made its appearance in good time to restore the jaded energies of the busy workers who had been pressed into the service.

They were jolly, merry days, these days spent in rejuvenating the Dower House, and in a way they even helped to lighten the burden Patricia carried. They gave her occupation—and work of one kind or another is an excellent panacea for a sore heart. Beyond that, there is a stimulation to be

found in good teamwork—in the comradeship, the give-and-take, the mutual interest—which served to draw her gradually out of herself.

Even if the desire of our hearts be denied us, we are so built that we can still find comfort in friendship, still feel the beauty which is in the world, still laugh at the humorous, whimsical side of things. And although at first it had seemed to Patricia that life would never again resume its normal, everyday aspect, she was beginning to find that the necessity of going on was bringing with it the ability to do so. She did not enjoy everything with the same zest as formerly, it is true, but she discovered with a certain inward astonishment that her power of enjoyment had not completely atrophied on the day her world fell in.

Her sense of values, too, was slowly changing. The things which had seemed to matter so enormously in the old days were gradually taking on a different perspective. Life, it appeared, the kernel of it, was not made up at all of the smoothnesses and pleasant happenings with which civilization has taught us to wrap it round. It was something separate and apart, enhanced and sweetened by these accompaniments but not in the least dependent on them. "*It's the big, primitive things that count,*" Kerry had said. And only now, when it was too late, when she had forfeited her right to love itself for the sake of the little, immaterial things that didn't count, was she beginning to realize the essential truth of this, to learn the real secret of living.

To Bernard Waybrant alone did she unburden herself of some of the thoughts and questionings which troubled her. It was on a day when they had all been buzzing about the Dower House like a swarm of bees and had finally gathered exhaustedly in one of the rooms for a cup of tea before wending their several ways homeward.

"I'll never get married again!" protested Kit exuberantly. "I'd no idea it entailed so much downright hard

labour—to say nothing of the mental strain of thinking out all this”—he waved his hand expansively towards the walls and ceiling.

“What about me, then?” chimed in Nancy. “I’ve got all the additional mental strain of thinking out my trousseau, as well as planning the house.”

“Trousseau? What the dickens do you want a trousseau for?” demanded Kit. “I never can think why women always want to tack a trousseau on to matrimony.”

“It’s usual,” she submitted meekly, with dancing eyes. Nancy was a very happy little person nowadays.

“Besides, frocks are a woman’s principal interest in a wedding,” asserted Peggy. “It would be a frightfully flat affair without the incentive provided by buying a trousseau. Which reminds me, Kit, I’m going to carry your young woman off to London in a few days, when we propose to indulge in a perfect orgy of shopping. Lady Mary’s given me *carte blanche*.” She looked across at Patricia, who was sitting in one of the window-seats with the Rector. “Why don’t you come, too, Pat?” she suggested. “There’s heaps of room at the flat.”

“Do!” implored Kit. “Go and keep a restraining hand on Nancy. If she and Peggy are let loose alone in London, they’ll buy up half the place.” In return for which Nancy landed a cushion on his head with neat and accurate aim and bolted out of the room and up the stairs with Kit in hot pursuit. Sounds of mingled laughter and appeals for mercy drifted down from the landing above and presently they appeared, breathless and giggling like two children, Kit having asserted his masculine supremacy by picking his future wife up bodily in his strong young arms and carrying her downstairs again.

“They seem overflowing happy,” observed Patricia to the Rector, as shortly afterwards they all started for home, Peggy and her brother driving, the others on foot. “They

are more like a couple of kiddies together than anything else," she added with a smile.

Waybrant's eyes rested thoughtfully on the young couple walking a few yards ahead of them.

"Yes," he agreed. "But I think they have the root of the matter in them."

"You mean?"

"I mean the only foundation for a happy marriage," he returned simply. "A perfectly unselfish love."

Patricia was silent for a few minutes. Then she said wistfully:

"Padre, you know about Kerry and—and me. Do you blame me very much?"

Waybrant looked down at the young face beside him, noting with quiet observation the changes which the last four months had wrought in it. It was thinner than its wont, the curve from cheek-bone to jaw hollowed a little, and one or two fine lines had made their appearance round the eyes and sensitive mouth.

"No, my dear," he said gently. "Blaming people isn't my job. If you had cared for Kerry so much that other things simply didn't count against it, you'd have gone with him. But if you hadn't that sized love for him, then you did better to remain behind. Life in the rough requires a deal of love to carry it through successfully."

"I feel ashamed of myself—it seems horribly cowardly and contemptible of me," confessed Patricia. "Padre, it's awfully difficult to understand one's own feelings. But you know"—speaking with that direct candour with which she always faced things—"I *do* value all those prettinesses of life which one gets in civilized parts. I've always had them and I should miss them appallingly. It was no good pretending, even to myself, that I shouldn't."

"It's never any use 'pretending,'" answered Waybrant with a quiet vehemence. "That's one of the big mistakes

so many people make. They humbug themselves. They won't face the straight issue, won't look at their weaknesses, even in the privacy of their own thoughts. . . . You've no need to blame yourself, my dear. It isn't your fault that all that we understand by civilized culture means so much to you, any more than it would be your fault if you had projecting teeth. It's the direct consequence of your whole environment. But, all the same," he added, with a funny little smile, "if you happened to have projecting teeth you'd probably take the matter in hand—wear a gold band and so on—and try to get them into shape."

And with that he turned the subject. That was Bernard Waybrant all over. He never preached, never laboured a point. He just dropped out a hint, a veiled suggestion that might help, and left it to do its work. But that did not mean that he thereupon ceased to ponder the matter himself. He had been thinking a good deal about Patricia of late, and the net result of his talk with her that afternoon was a visit to Anton Roy.

"Peggy Bethune," he said whimsically, "you made an inspired suggestion yesterday which I want you to put into practice."

"I know I abound with inspired suggestions, padre," she retorted. "But to which particular flash of genius are you referring?"

"To the one which included Pat Luttrell in your trip to London. Take her with you."

Peggy's face beamed. She had her own reasons for wishing that Patricia would join them at the flat. Mark was going with them, and Peggy knew herself to be an adept in the art of handling a *partie carrée*.

"I'd love to take her!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Do you think she'd come?"

"I leave you to manage that. She's been living under a biggish strain recently and she needs taking out of herself." He did not add that he wanted Patricia to test, amid sur-

roundings which offered the severest temptation and the fullest opportunities, the new sense of values which he discerned struggling to life within her.

So it came about a few days later that Peggy and her brother, Nancy and Patricia, all departed Londonwards and established themselves in the former's luxurious flat in Mayfair, leaving Kit, as he informed them bitterly, to continue working like a navvy while they dallied amongst the fleshpots of Egypt.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"BETWEEN YOU AND THE WORLD"

ALTHOUGH the season proper had hardly yet begun, London was looking its brightest and gayest. Most of the houses had been smartened with a coat of fresh paint, window-boxes were gay with flowers, and there was a general air of stir and bustle as though the old city were waking up to welcome her children as they came flocking back from Italy and the South of France, from all the warm, sunshiny corners of Europe whither they had fled during her season of cold and fog.

In spite of herself Patricia felt an inward thrill, found herself greeting each fresh day with a renewal of interest that had been utterly lacking down at Strangways. You need to be happy to weather triumphantly the long dull days of the country during the winter. The monotonous grey skies, the sodden fields, the leafless trees waving eerie, naked arms in the bitter wind are all too closely in harmony with the heart's sadness. But the busy movement of the city, with its glimpses of other folks' lives, its colourful brightness of shop-windows, and at night its lamp-lit streets, alive with cars and taxicabs bearing jolly parties of friends to restaurant or theatre, all combine to distract your thoughts from the weight of your own particular burden. Even the shrill cry of the newsboy is a friendly tap from the outside world on the door of your consciousness.

And it must be confessed that, once in London, Peggy did not allow the grass to grow under her feet. She and Strown were extremely popular people, possessing a large circle of friends, and a speedily inaugurated programme of little intimate lunches and dinners, of evenings at the play or at a

concert, varied by bridge and dancing, left Patricia small leisure for brooding over the past.

Nevertheless, in spite of a certain limited enjoyment which she derived from the whirl of gaiety provided by her hostess, and in spite of her instinctive appreciation of the rightness of everything—of the beautifully appointed flat, the limousine which bore them swiftly about town, the perfection of ordered detail that made life run on oiled wheels, as it were—she was conscious of a new feeling of comparative indifference to all these matters. Their relative importance in the scheme of things was changing, and she was beginning to realize that, of themselves, they were powerless to bring happiness. They were only the “trimmings” of existence, after all—and trimmings are essentially futile when there is nothing to attach them to!

The spare hours of the mornings were rigorously devoted to shopping—the purchase of the trousseau which Lady Mary had insisted was to be her gift to Nancy being the main objective of the whole visit. Now and then, as the three women discussed and handled the various exquisite silks and satins which the Dresden China Lady’s generous *carte blanche* regarding price permitted, Patricia was aware of a dull ache somewhere in the depths of her consciousness. It was not that she envied Nancy the lovely concrete things, but it was impossible to evade the remembrance of what all this choosing and buying postulated—the ultimate happiness which was destined to be Nancy’s but from which she herself was debarred for ever. The contrast was bound to hurt her, and sometimes it seemed as if Nancy herself were equally conscious of it. There would come a look into her brown eyes as though some thought were struggling within her for utterance—as though there were something she longed to say but dared not.

The companionship of Strown counted for a great deal during these days in London. With the understanding which was so peculiarly his gift he seemed to divine just what would

most contribute to Patricia's pleasure. Unobtrusively he surrounded her with that atmosphere of homage, of instinctive service, of being shielded and protected, in which a happy woman blossoms like a flower and which brings a sense of healing even to the tired spirit of an unhappy one.

Inevitably she grew to lean upon him, to turn to him as the good comrade who never failed her. Together they rode in the Row, danced, enthused over the same books and music, and discussed everything from high heaven itself downwards. And Patricia, frankly happy in their increasing friendship, quite forgot that an intimacy such as this might hold almost as much of pain as pleasure for a man who still loved her. Perhaps it was in part due to the very completeness of Mark's subjugation of self in his relations with her that she had gradually come to discount the fact of his having once asked her to marry him—had grown to believe that he had "got over it," and so discarded those intangible defences which a woman insensibly erects betwixt herself and a man whose love she has refused. And one day the inevitable happened, and she found that Mark was exactly as much her lover as he had ever been and was asking her once again, in that deep, gentle voice of his, to be his wife.

It came upon her with a shock of bewildered surprise. She faltered away from him—from the touch of his hands holding hers, from the warm, eager worship of his eyes.

"I thought—— Oh, Mark, I thought all that was past—that you'd got over it."

He smiled down at her a little sadly.

"Did you? When a man loves a woman as I love you, he doesn't 'get over it.' Nor does his love ever slide into the past tense. . . . No, my dear, I love you now just as I ever loved you, and—whatever your answer may be—just as I shall always love you. There will never be any other woman in my life."

A heavy silence fell between them.

"I can't give you the answer you want," she said at last,

very gently. Then, as she saw the swift look of pain which leaped into his eyes, she went on quickly: "Though everything is over—quite over—between Kerry and me, I've not changed. I don't suppose I ever shall change." She flung out her hands hopelessly. "One can't stop—caring—just because one wants to." She ceased, waiting quiveringly for his answer. But for a moment none came, and she went on urgently: "Oh, try—try to understand! It is so hateful having to hurt you like this!"

"Dear," he said at last, "I do understand. It's you who haven't quite understood me. Answer me one question. Is it possible that you and Lorimer might ever come together again? Can anything be done to put things right between you?"

Her face whitened. There could be only one answer to that question. Kerry would never again ask her to come to him. He had been adamant even when she had humbled herself to the dust and begged him to take her with him. The memory of that day of utterest humiliation was burnt into her, and now that she had learned, too late, which were the things in life that mattered, pride—that woman's pride which he had trampled on—sealed her lips. She would make no second appeal.

"No," she answered very low. "We shall never come together again. Never."

"Then, if that is so, I still ask you to be my wife," said Strown quietly and with great tenderness. "If your answer had been a different one I would have said no more—I should have had no right. But if you and Lorimer have parted for all time, then any man is free to try and bring what happiness he may into your life, if you will let him. Don't misunderstand me, Pat—I think you were misunderstanding me. I'm not asking you for anything you don't feel you can give. I never will. I only want you to give me the right to take care of you, to serve you any way I can—to love you without asking for your love in return. I would be content

with the same friendship you give me now. Only"—with sudden passion—"I want the right—the *right* to stand between you and the world."

She was silent. It was wonderful—heartshaking—to be offered love like this, love which had no thought but of the loved one. The woman in her ached to give him back something for all the treasure he was pouring out so unreservedly at her feet. And she could only look at him with pitiful, desolate eyes. She had nothing to give.

"Mark"—her voice shook a trifle, but with that sincerity which was a part of her she faced the issue straightforwardly. "If I could only say 'yes' to you, I would—so gladly. But I can't. It wouldn't be playing fair. You think, now, that you would be content with friendship. At least"—with a sad little smile—"you're trying to believe that you would, and to make me believe it, too. But the time would come when you wouldn't be content, when you would ask of me more than I could give you, and you would feel hurt and cheated because I couldn't give it."

"No," he said. "No, I should not." And in the steadfast tones of his voice there lay the absolute conviction of a man who has looked deep into his own soul and speaks of what he knows. "I'm not a hot-headed boy, remember. I'm a man, and for the last six months I've been face to face with the fact that you, the woman I love, were right outside my life and going to remain there—so apart from me that I could never do anything more for you than any other man you admitted to your friendship. I believed that nothing else could ever be possible. But now I know there is no question of reconciliation between you and Lorimer, that the break between you is absolute—and I ask you to make it possible for me to have more rights in your life than other men. Give me the joy of knowing that whatever you want done, it is my right to do it, that whatever of suffering life brings to you, I may be at hand to help you through it, there to shield you and care for you. . . . Do you think that is

so little for you to give me? Pat . . . dearest . . . if you knew all that you mean to me, you'd understand that I know what I'm asking and that I will never make any demand on you beyond the right to be your closest friend.”

His pleading moved her unspeakably. She was touched to the core of her. If the gift of herself—that limited giving which was all he asked of her meant so much to him—why, after all, should she refuse it? He was a lonely, unhappy man, whose loneliness lay, however undesignedly, at her own door. Her life, as it stretched before her now, was singularly empty and devoid of meaning. What better thing could she do with it than try to mend this other life she had so unwittingly shattered? Friendship, companionship—it was little enough to give! And it left the secret altar of her heart untouched and sacred to the love she had lost.

He saw her hesitation. Taking her hands in his he drew her towards him.

“Pat,” he said, “won't you trust me—trust me with yourself?”

She lifted her face to his and met his eyes—grave and steadfast, with the light of a very wonderful love burning steadily in them. With a caught breath—half-sob, half-tremulous cry—she yielded, and very gently, with ineffable tenderness, he bent and kissed her.

Later on, when the quiet gravity of those first few moments had passed, she smiled at him rather forlornly.

“I'm afraid you're getting a very one-sided bargain, my poor Mark,” she said ruefully.

“I'm quite content,” he answered. Adding, with the familiar touch of whimsicality: “It's a very much better bargain than at one time I could have dreamed possible.”

An hour later, when Peggy and Nancy returned home from a private view at the studio of an artist friend, they were met with the news of the engagement. Peggy rejoiced frankly and whole-heartedly.

"I've always wanted you for Mark," she told Patricia. "And I know he'll make you happy. He'd make the most demanding woman in the world happy, I verily believe."

"I'm not demanding," returned Patricia. And then felt a stab of pain at her heart as she realized how much sad, unhappy truth lay in those three short words as applied to herself and Mark.

Nancy's felicitations were offered more quietly, tinged with a certain wistfulness, and somehow she managed altogether to evade congratulating Strown. He noticed the omission and taxed her lightly with it when next they were alone together.

"And have you no good wishes for me, Nancy?" he demanded quizzically. "I'm feeling distinctly neglected. I thought you were a good enough pal of mine to have my welfare at heart!"

For a moment she looked at him with troubled brown eyes. They were like the eyes of a dog which is dumbly anxious and concerned on behalf of a beloved master. Strown had been an adored friend of hers since she was a child of thirteen.

"I am. Oh, I am!" she cried passionately. "I *do* want you to be happy!" With a stifled sob, she snatched his hand, and, kissing it with a sudden childish fervour, fled from the room.

CHAPTER XXXV

TWO WEDDINGS

“WELL, little girl, and so you’re going to run away from me to-morrow for good and all.”

As he spoke, Waybrant pressed the tobacco down into his pipe a trifle more firmly and struck a match. Dusk was stealing over the Rectory veranda—the scented dusk of early May—and the flare of the match revealed the Rector’s face as tired and rather sad-looking. It was not going to be altogether easy for him to let this only child of his go to her new home, even though that home would not be far distant. The old Rectory would seem very forlorn and empty without the impetuous rush of her light feet, the sound of her gay young voice. And now that the wedding eve had come, he was realizing all this very clearly.

Nancy, perched on his knee, slid a comforting arm round his neck.

“Only for a month, Dad darling, while we’re honeymooning,” she said. “After that, you’ll hardly know I’ve been married, I shall be here so often.”

“And what will Kit say to that, I wonder?” he demanded teasingly.

Nancy gave an impish little grin.

“I shall instruct him in the whole duty of a child to her parent,” she submitted. “Besides, you don’t suppose, do you, that Kit would ever prevent my doing anything that made me happy?”

“No, I don’t,” answered the Rector heartily. “I think you’re going to have a very good husband, my dear. Probably he’ll spoil you, and I shall find it incumbent upon me to administer an antidote when you condescend to visit me.”

"We shall spoil each other—that's the best way to be happy when you're married," said Nancy, speaking with profounder wisdom than she knew. "I wish"—suddenly—"I felt as sure that Patricia and Mark were going to be happy as I do that Kit and I will be!"

"Why shouldn't they be happy?" he asked. "Strown's a very fine character, in my opinion."

"He's a *dear!*" exclaimed Nancy fervently. "And that's just it. He ought to have married someone who—who had never loved a Kerry."

"It depends upon which was the real love and which the will-o'-the-wisp," said Waybrant quietly. "We're all liable to be led away by the latter—we're only poor human beings, after all. And perhaps Pat has learned now to know the true from the false."

In common with the Earl and Lady Mary, the Rector had been privately somewhat taken by surprise when he learned of Patricia's engagement to Mark Strown. The visit to London had not produced the results he had hoped and expected. He had thought it would reveal to Patricia's awakening perceptions the paltry value of those things which she had allowed to come betwixt herself and Lorimer, and so perhaps lead ultimately to a reconciliation. That it would act, apparently, in a totally opposite direction and culminate in her giving herself to Strown was the last thing he had anticipated. But of the key to the puzzle, of that last scene when the man she loved had refused her pleading and driven her from him, he was in ignorance.

"It is just possible," he continued presently, pulling a stray lock of Nancy's hair, "that you are quite wrong in thinking you and Kit are going to have the monopoly of married happiness! Lorimer is rather a romantic figure, you know—first misjudged, then an exile living a wild, adventurous kind of life, and finally proved triumphantly innocent. Many a woman might imagine herself in love with a man of that type. And then, when it came to the crucial

test, discover that it wasn't the kind of love that stood testing. If that's the case, it's by far the best thing that could have happened for Pat to have found it out before it was too late."

Nancy looked unconvinced.

"But I don't believe that *was* the case," she declared. "Do you really think it was, Dad?"

"My dear, it's impossible for us to see into each other's hearts. We can only grope for motives when people act quite differently from what we expected they would do. That, and keep our faith in them. . . . And now, in view of the great occasion to-morrow, don't you think you'd better run off to bed and get your beauty sleep?"

She nodded, and presently, when the last good nights had been exchanged between them, she went upstairs, a rather sober-hearted little bride-to-be, leaving the Rector to pace slowly up and down, far into the night, his thoughts pre-occupied with the strange tangle of human nature.

From her seat in the chancel Patricia watched Nancy coming slowly up the church—on Lord Marchdale's arm, since Waybrant himself was taking part of the marriage service. Behind them fluttered a cluster of tiny bride-maidens and pages of whom the eldest could only lay claim to seven years. Somehow their extreme youth seemed appropriate. Nancy herself looked hardly more than a child in her bridal white, with her soft hair peeping out beneath the veiled coronal of orange-blossom and her big brown eyes shyly seeking Kit's as he stood waiting for her, Strown, in his capacity of best man, standing just behind him.

Patricia could not help reflecting on the mutability of things. Little more than six months ago the old Earl had been swearing by all his gods that his nephew should never marry a "parson's brat," and now here he was beamingly conveying that same parson's brat up the aisle to her wedding with Kit—and looking as though the job were thoroughly

to his liking! In fact, it had been his own suggestion that he should give away the bride and that the wedding reception should be held at Strangways instead of at the Rectory.

And—the thought followed swiftly in the wake of the other—six months ago she and Kerry had been supremely happy in each other's love, whilst now they were parted for as long as life should last—Kerry, like Ishmael, wandering once more in the wilderness and she herself promised in marriage to another man. A feeling of desolation swept over her. Somehow, between them, with their pride and their misunderstandings, and the clash of opposing temperaments and values, she and Kerry had contrived to make a terrible mess of things.

Her glance roved over the crowded church with its row upon row of peering, eager faces stretching right back till at the further end they merged into an indeterminate white blur. The service had begun now. For how many amongst that congregation must not the familiar words awaken poignant memories! Were they glad or sorrowful, those memories, she wondered? Tender memories of a sweet and wonderful journeying through life—young together, growing old together, sharing with each other whatever came, whether of happiness or grief, good luck or ill? Or bitter, corroding memories of young brave hopes that had foundered in a sea of disillusionment?

“ . . . love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

They were big vows for a man to make, big vows to keep. Yet, as Patricia's glance rested on Kit's face, she saw a new look of gravity in the usually gay blue eyes, heard a new note of resolve in his quiet *“I will,”* and knew, in that moment, that for Nancy, at least, marriage would mean safe haven and happiness.

For herself . . . She thrust the thought almost violently away from her, and a few minutes later she made one of the

little company gathered in the vestry, where, amid laughter and kisses and congratulations, the final signing of the register was accomplished. As they emerged once more, to the familiar strains of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, she overheard Lady Mary say wistfully to the Earl: "I wish Kerry could have been with us to-day." Once again the sword of memory pricked her. It was she who had driven him away. Oh, were these dreadful little reminders going to haunt her all through life? Was it impossible to close the door effectually on the past? With an effort she fought back the thoughts which Lady Mary's spontaneous wish had let loose, and presently, caught up into the stream of mirth and good spirits which seems inseparable from a big wedding, she forgot for a while her own private troubles and found herself merged in the general gaiety.

The arrangements followed the time-honoured routine of the Wynsborough weddings. The village of Stranwood was gay with flags and bunting, and when the gates of Strangways were reached the horses were taken out of the bride and bridegroom's carriage—nothing so new-fangled as an automobile had brought them back from church—ropes were attached, and a band of lusty young villagers pulled the carriage triumphantly up to the castle entrance. Later, before lunch, Kit and a confused and blushing Nancy appeared on the terrace overlooking the lawns, where a big crowd of the Earl's tenants had gathered, and smilingly acknowledged the roar of cheers that greeted them.

"I'd no idea you made so much fuss over weddings in England," Patricia observed in astonishment to Peggy. "It's enough to frighten one off matrimony once and for all!"

"Oh, my dear, we don't—we lesser lights," replied Peggy, who was enjoying herself hugely. "You forget that Kit's the 'heir to the throne!' So of course Lord Marchdale—bless him!—won't allow a single one of the old family customs to be omitted."

Afterwards, the tenants cleared off to partake of a good

old-fashioned English dinner of roast beef and plum pudding to which the Earl had invited them, while the wedding-guests lunched more delicately—though probably with no less enjoyment—in the panelled hall. Speeches were made and toasts given, the first and foremost of these being “the bride and bridegroom,” which was proposed by the Earl himself. When he had drunk their health, in accordance with immemorial Wyncborough custom he tossed his wine-glass over his shoulder to the ground, where it shattered into fragments, so that no other, alien toast should ever again be honoured in the same crystal goblet.

“A very expensive custom,” Peggy remarked as she watched a servant deftly remove the tinkling débris. “But delightfully mediæval and romantic. And, fortunately for the family finances, there’s only likely to be an occasional wedding or so in each generation.”

Later in the day, sped by a hail of confetti and good wishes, and with a white satin slipper surreptitiously attached to the car for luck, Kit and Nancy drove off to the station, after which the guests melted speedily away, leaving those at the castle to contend with the inevitable reaction which succeeds a wedding.

Breakfast, the following morning, was a somewhat depressing meal. Peggy and Mark had remained overnight at the castle, but even the former’s mercurial spirits were a degree or two below normal.

“If the ‘happy couple’ only realized the deadly sensation of flatness, staleness, and general unprofitableness which descends upon everyone else concerned the day after a wedding, I believe no one could be so callous to the sufferings of their fellow human beings as to go and get married,” she declared. “What on earth shall we do with ourselves to-day, Pat? Risk indigestion by consuming too much wedding-cake, I suppose”—resignedly.

“I’m going down to the church to see if my bracelet is

there," declared Patricia with promptitude. "I expect it dropped off in the vestry, when I took my glove off." She had missed a slim chain bracelet soon after her return to the castle the previous day, and when a thorough search had failed to reveal its whereabouts someone had suggested that it might have fallen from her wrist before leaving the church.

"I'll go with you," volunteered Mark.

Accordingly, a few minutes later they sped down the drive in Strown's two-seater and ran into Stranwood. The tower clock was striking ten as they descended from the car and passed under the lich-gate, and the dewy freshness of the morning was all about them. And then, just as Strown had lifted the heavy latch of the church door, Patricia, glancing back, saw a man and woman approaching along the path. They were neither of them very young. The woman must have been at least thirty-five and the man a few years older, and on both faces were the patient, ineffaceable lines graven by some past pain or sorrow.

They came straight towards the church, as though that were definitely their goal, and when they reached the porch Patricia stood aside half-instinctively to let them enter. As they passed her, the man looked down at the woman beside him. The eyes of the two met, and never had Patricia seen an expression of such happy confidence, of such complete and utter radiance as glowed on both their faces as together they crossed the threshold of the church and passed into the tender greyness within.

"They're going to be married!" she whispered to Mark.

He nodded silently. He, too, had caught that wonderful look of mutual happiness which they had exchanged. Beckoning to him to follow her, Patricia led the way into the church, and they slipped unobtrusively into one of the pews at the side. By the chancel steps they could see Bernard Waybrant. The morning sunlight, filtering in through the windows, sent a shaft of palely golden light across his tall, surpliced figure, as he stood awaiting the two who were now

moving quietly up the aisle, side by side. The black, shadowy figure of the verger flitted noiselessly into another pew, where old Martha from the Rectory, attending in the capacity of a witness to the marriage, was already seated.

. . . It was the simplest of weddings—just the man and woman who were vowing themselves to each other, God's priest, and the tranquil purity of the early morning folded about them like some holy benison. Patricia felt unbidden tears start to her eyes. She wondered what lay behind it all—what long, difficult road these two lovers had traversed before this simple service, shorn of all the customary trappings which attend a marriage, united them and made them one.

It was soon over. For a few moments they vanished into the vestry to sign the register. Presently they reappeared and, still with that look of quiet radiance in their eyes, passed out of the church and into the spring sunshine.

"That's how I should like to be married," said Mark quietly, as, having recovered Patricia's lost bracelet, they made their way back to the waiting car. "No fuss, no crowds. Just you and I, Pat, walking into church one morning and coming out man and wife."

She was very silent on the way home. The beauty and significance of that simple wedding they had just witnessed had filled her with a strange tumult of emotion. She felt as though she had lost her way, were struggling in the dark with no light to guide her steps. Had she been wrong to give the promise she had given Mark? She was conscious of a sudden frightened recoil from the pledge she had made—of a wild, insensate longing to reclaim her freedom. When Kerry should hear of her marriage to Mark Strown, what would he think—believe? He would never understand, never know the truth, never guess at the turmoil of conflicting influences and emotions which had carried her into it. He would think merely that she had chosen to marry another man who could give her all those material things which, if

she had married him, she would have had to go without. And he would scorn her accordingly.

The realization so wrought upon her that she was fiercely tempted to ask Mark to release her, to free her from her promise to him. And then the recollection of how utterly good he had been to her, of how true and staunch a friend he had proved himself, closed her lips. She could not bring herself to hurt him so intolerably. She had failed Kerry. At least she would not fail Mark, too.

All of it, all that had happened had followed as the consequence of her own actions, of her own false sense of values, her fear of that unknown life into which her love for Kerry would have taken her. And now that the reckoning had come she must not shirk it. There was one thing left which she could do, and she would do it. She could be loyal to Mark, loyal to the promise she had given him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

UNDER THE CEDAR TREE

"PHEW! It's infernally hot!" exclaimed Kit, fanning his flushed face energetically with a cabbage leaf and thereby making himself several degrees hotter. "There's a thunderstorm simmering somewhere, I'm sure, and I wish the dickens it would stop simmering and boil over! It'd be cooler afterwards."

He and Nancy and Patricia were having tea beneath a big cedar on the lawn in front of the Dower House. It was certainly oppressively hot. Overhead burned the blue shot with gold of a late August sky. Not a leaf was stirring. Even the voices of the birds had died languidly into silence, as though they, too, had succumbed to the heat and lacked the energy to sing.

Nancy's eyes scanned the horizon consideringly.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't think it will come to thunder. The sky's too clear."

"The skies are as brass," interpolated Kit lugubriously.

"They are. So I'm afraid you'll have to grin and bear it, Kit," she returned, throwing a glance of amused commiseration at his heated countenance. "What on earth have you been doing to get so hot?"

"Gardening," he responded laconically.

"Which particular branch of gardening?" inquired Patricia, smiling.

"I've been tying up the pergola roses rather more artistically—and with a keener eye to the poor things' ultimate welfare—than our highly recommended gardener seems able to do. His one idea appears to be to strangle them out of

existence as quickly as possible," explained Kit. Adding, fiercely: "I'm going to sack that man. He doesn't know his job."

A few minutes later he departed to continue his labours upon the pergola, first stooping to bestow a light kiss on his wife's hair.

"You all right, old thing?"

She nodded and smiled up at him. Then, as he swung away across the lawn, she picked up some sewing on which she had been engaged prior to the advent of tea—delicate hand-embroidery worked upon a froth of snowy cambric, every stitch of which was a labour of the purest love God ever puts into a woman's heart.

As the summer advanced, Nancy had flagged a trifle. Her small round face had grown thinner and more sharply angled, while in her eyes lay often a secret, dreaming look, as though her thoughts went shyly and tenderly ahead to that time when the little new life of which the promise had been given should come to widen and make more wonderful still her own life—hers and Kit's.

Patricia was a frequent visitor nowadays at the Dower House, and there were many times when the happy little ménage awakened in her heart a dull, aching realization of all that she had missed. It rushed over her afresh this afternoon, as Kit, with that boyishly off-hand: "You all right, old thing?" went jauntily away to tend his pergola. She knew that beneath the casual slang of the day lay all the tender concern and devotion of the lover.

Her thoughts slipped back to the day when she had ridden into the Forest and encountered Kerry caravanning, and to the fleeting glimpse she had caught of that lonely homestead standing by itself in a clearing. She recalled the woman waiting eagerly on the threshold, her crowing baby in her arms, and presently her man had come striding across the pine-threaded turf towards her and the cottage door had closed upon the three of them, shutting them into happiness.

In Patricia's mind a deep, abiding kinship seemed to link together the Dower House and the Forest cottage. Her own life, she recognized, could never now be anything other than a makeshift of what life was really meant to be. Always she had missed the substance—first with Kerry, and now, inevitably, with Mark.

"Have you fixed on what date in October you're going to be married?"

Nancy's voice jerked her out of her reverie, and the colour ebbed swiftly from her face as the other's sudden question chimed in only too aptly with her thoughts.

"No—yes," she stammered. "Mark has suggested the tenth."

"And you? Doesn't that date suit for some reason?"

"I suppose it will do as well as any other."

Nancy laid her sewing down on her knee and glanced around. They were quite alone. Some distance away she could hear Kit whistling little snatches from a popular musical comedy as he worked. She drew a long breath, like one about to take a plunge.

"Pat," she said quietly. "Are you sure you're going to be quite happy with Mark?"

As swiftly as the colour had ebbed from Patricia's face, now it returned, mounting to her very temples.

"Why on earth shouldn't I be?" she replied evasively. "Surely any woman could be happy with Mark?"

"Yes—if she were in love with him," returned Nancy soberly. "That makes all the difference."

"You're imagining I'm not in love with him, then?" demanded Patricia lightly, forcing a smile.

Nancy lifted a pair of serious brown eyes to her face.

"Are you?" she asked gravely.

Patricia sprang restlessly to her feet.

"My dear, it's rather late in the day to begin asking questions of that kind. I've promised to marry Mark. Isn't that convincing enough for you?"

For a moment Nancy made no reply. Then, with an effort, she said:

"Then you didn't care for—Kerry?" The other vouchsafed no answer, and she went on desperately: "Pat, tell me, why did you get engaged to Mark?"

To the anxious, searching brown eyes fixed upon it, Patricia's face seemed to grow all at once haggard and pinched-looking. At last she spoke—slowly, almost as though she were speaking to herself.

"I made a mistake. And one has to pay for mistakes of that kind with the rest of one's life." She bent forward impulsively and brushed Nancy's cheek with her lips. "Thank God, Nancy, thank Him every day of your life, that you never made that mistake." And the next moment Nancy found herself alone. Patricia had fled into the house.

A day or two later, sitting by herself under the shade of the same cedar tree, Nancy looked up to see a white-capped maid coming towards her across the lawn, followed by Mark Strown.

The colour rose sensitively in her face. Of itself, a visit from Mark was not calculated to cause her any inward perturbation. He habitually came and went at the Dower House with the easy informality of an intimate friend, and as a rule she hailed his appearance with delight. But this visit was different. To-day she would have to do what for the last few days she had been nerving herself to do when next she should see him. And Nancy hated hurting anyone, above all, anyone of whom she was as fond as she was of Strown. But she felt that she owed her own happiness to Patricia, and now that the opportunity had come when she might be able to help Patricia back to hers in return she was determined to attempt it, cost what it might.

She welcomed Mark, therefore, a little diffidently, gave him tea, and waited nervously for some opening in the desultory conversation which might enable her to broach the sub-

ject that was weighing so heavily on her mind. It was he himself who at last unwittingly gave her the opportunity she sought.

"I suppose Pat has told you?" he said, smiling. "We've fixed the wedding day for October the 10th."

"Yes, she told me," she answered.

Perhaps some different quality in her voice struck him, or perhaps it was merely the unwonted brevity of her reply. He looked across at her curiously.

"You don't seem particularly interested," he hazarded quizzically.

Nancy's hands, lying idly on her lap, clasped themselves tightly together.

"No," she said. "No." Then, falteringly, and keeping her eyes averted. "Mark, are you sure—*sure*—that you'll be happy together?"

A sudden keenness flashed into his hazel eyes, to be instantly veiled. When next she summoned up courage to look at him they were regarding her with their usual kindly, whimsical expression.

"There are very few things in this life of which one can be sure," he said lightly. "Have you any particular reason for your question?"

"Yes." She swallowed once or twice, feeling herself unable to speak.

"What is it, Nancy child? You're not afraid, surely, to tell me anything that is in your mind? We're too old friends for that."

She shook her head. "No, not afraid, Mark. But it makes me feel bad—to think of—of hurting you."

A change seemed to pass over him—a tautening of the muscles as if he were bracing himself against something—although the change was so slight as to be hardly noticeable.

"It needn't," he said, without any perceptible alteration in his steady, kindly tones. "One can't expect to go through life without getting a few knocks. I've had some. Very

likely I'll have a few more before I'm through. So fire away, Nancy. Let's have yours and get it over."

Twice she tried to speak and failed. The third time the words came, unevenly.

"I'm sure Pat still cares for Kerry," she said. Then waited painfully for his reply. It did not come for a moment, but when it did it was quiet and composed.

"What makes you think that? Do you believe a woman would marry one man, still caring for another?"

"Yes—if the other man wouldn't have her—had refused her!" she said breathlessly.

"Are you trying to tell me that Lorimer refused to marry Pat—refused when she was willing to marry him?"

She nodded.

"Yes. I know—because I overheard. It was one day just after his accident. Every one was out except Pat, and when I had gone part-way home to the Rectory I remembered that I'd left some accounts of Lady Mary's, which I wanted to go through, in the sun-parlour. So I went back to fetch them. When I reached the sun-parlour door I heard voices—Pat's and Kerry's. They sounded—different from usual. I can't quite explain it, but somehow I got the impression they weren't just talking ordinarily together." She paused and looked across at Mark. He nodded understandingly.

"I know what you mean," he said. "Go on."

"Well, that made me pause outside the door just a moment before breaking in on them, and then I heard Pat ask him to forgive her and take her with him to Rhodesia. I heard that, and his answer: 'No, I will not.' His voice sounded dreadful." She shivered a little. "I went away then. But you know what happened afterwards—everything came to an end between them."

For a long time Mark was silent. Nancy did not look at him. She felt sick with misery. Presently he got up and stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

"You're a plucky little soul, Nancy," he said gently.

"Thank you for telling me. I knew—part—of it. You can leave things to me, now. I promise you I'll make Pat happy. Will that content you—my promise?"

With an effort she raised her eyes to his face.

"You know it will," she said in a stifled voice.

"Then—trust me."

When he had gone, she sat for a long time thinking how hard it was that to heal the hurt of one friend she must bitterly wound another. It was not until the lengthening shadows warned her that the afternoon was drawing in that at last she rose and made her way slowly back to the house.

She passed the next few days at rather high tension, wondering when the seed she had sown would bear fruit. At any moment she expected to hear the news that Patricia's engagement to Strown was broken off, and the suspense of waiting for something to happen preyed upon her nerves a little.

Even to the least observant it was obvious that Patricia was living under a strain of some kind. In repose, her face fell into lines of deep sadness. For the rest, she was keyed up, nervously restless, and sleepless nights had sharpened the contours of her face and painted violet shadows beneath her eyes. Even Kit, who was not wont to observe in detail the appearance of anyone other than his wife, remarked that "Pat was looking shockingly off colour."

And then one afternoon Peggy burst in upon them at the Dower House and announced that she and Mark had thought of a "perfectly splendid idea."

"It seems unlikely," remarked Kit mildly in return, and was promptly informed by Peggy that if he didn't behave himself he should be excluded from taking any part in the suggested project. Briefly, the proposal embraced a ten days' cruise in Strown's private yacht, the *Silver Butterfly*.

"We'd have loved you all to come," said Peggy, "but Lady Mary and your godfather"—turning smilingly to Patricia—"say they'd much prefer to remain on dry land! But it would do Nancy a whole heap of good, and you, too, Pat."

"A kind of pick-me-up before the fatal tenth," suggested Kit.

Peggy nodded.

"So will you all come? It really would be very jolly if this weather lasts. And Mark's becoming seriously concerned about you, Pat—you're getting so abominably thin. I had to assure him that it was quite a common failing with brides-to-be."

Patricia laughed. "He needn't worry about me. I was always numbered amongst the lean kine."

"But you'll come?" insisted Peggy. "It'll blow the cobwebs away, if it does nothing else."

"Of course I'll come"—simply. She felt quite indifferent as to whether she went or not. But if Mark wished it, that settled the matter as far as she was concerned. Lately she had developed a habit of numb acquiescence in any proposal that was brought forward, evincing neither enthusiasm nor distaste.

Kit joyfully accepted the invitation for himself and Nancy. It would be the very thing for the latter, he declared, and although Nancy could not but look forward to the trip from a personal point of view, her heart sank as she realized that there was going to be no particular outcome of her interview with Mark, after all—that interview which had cost her so many heart-searchings and not a few tears.

Somehow he must have misunderstood her—completely. Obviously no thought of breaking off his engagement with Patricia had entered his head. He had only been thinking what more he could do to add to her enjoyment of life—to make her happy. And so he had devised this trip on his yacht.

A cruise in the *Silver Butterfly* as a cure for a broken heart! Nancy laughed hysterically as she thought of it, then cried hot tears into her pillow, and no persuasion of her bewildered husband's could drag from her the cause of either her laughter or her tears.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A HANDFUL OF GREEN ACRES

"The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose."—ISAIAH

THE *Silver Butterfly* was steaming smoothly over a calm sea. For the last two or three days she had been cruising round the coast, but now her bows were pointed away from England.

Overhead, in the darkly blue sky, the moon hung like a golden globe, as though only waiting until the last red rays of the setting sun faded from the west before flooding the world with her lambent light. Here and there, curious jagged rocks cut the surface of the water, and in the distance, shadowy and mysterious in the wavering evening dusk, loomed the dim shapes of a cluster of islands.

Sometimes silent, sometimes conversing in a desultory fashion, Patricia and Mark were strolling slowly up and down the deck together. From the saloon below, where Peggy and the Wynsboroughs were playing cut-throat bridge, came an occasional gust of laughter, wafted up the companion stairway.

Presently a longer silence than usual fell between the two who were pacing the deck. Mark appeared to have become absorbed in his own thoughts, and Patricia, soothed by the peace of the tranquil evening and the steady, rhythmic throb of the engine, felt no particular impulse to break in upon the reverie into which he had fallen. Once she heard him draw his breath in sharply between his teeth, but, glancing up involuntarily, she saw that his face was still quiet and unmoved. Only it seemed to her that it was more thoughtful than usual, impressed with some definite purpose.

At length, still without speaking, he drew her to the side

of the deck. Leaning against the rail, he pointed to a small, distant speck which lay beyond the nearer islands.

"Do you know what that place is?" he asked. "Ahead there, to our left?" Then, before she could reply, he went on quietly: "It's Brihou Island."

A quiver ran through her. The name was like a cry out of the past, jangling her heart-strings.

"Where Kerry used to be," she half-whispered.

"Where Kerry *is*," he corrected.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "In his last letter to Lady Mary he said he was leaving Brihou for Rhodesia."

"But he hasn't left yet," answered Strown. "I've ascertained that. He is still on the island."

Again a tremor ran through her body. If that were true, only a few miles—a few miles—separated her from Kerry! The knowledge that she was nearer to him now than she had been for so many weary months tugged at her very soul. She bit her lips to keep back the cry of sheer, stark longing which fought for utterance. For days past she had been thinking of him as on his way to South Africa, every hour, every minute as it sped, bearing him further away from her, carrying him out of her life for ever. And now the realization that he had *not* gone, that he was only a few short miles away, turned the quiet acceptance of her lot to which she had been schooling herself into a chaos of despairing misery. For a moment she seemed to lose consciousness of everything around her. She clung blindly to the deck-rail, her fingers gripping it desperately, while she strove to regain command of herself. And then, through the clamour of her thoughts came Mark's voice, a note of infinite understanding in its quiet tones.

"Pat, my dear, you've been very brave, very plucky. You've tried not to let me see how things were with you. But, thank God, my eyes have been opened before it's too late—before I spoiled your whole life for you."

"What do you mean?" she said, in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. "What do you mean?"

"I never knew the actual reason why you parted from Lorimer," continued Mark. "Do you think you could bring yourself to tell me, dear?"

She swung round towards him, still retaining her hold of the deck-rail with one hand. Her face was white to the lips.

"Yes," she said fiercely. "We parted because his standard was too high for me. I couldn't reach up to it. That was why."

"And now?" he persisted gently. "And now?"

"What does it matter—now? It's too late. Don't you see that it's too late?" She beat her fist on the rail. "I've learned—everything—too late!"

"No," he said quietly. "It's not too late. Kerry is over there, on Brihou Island, and you can still go to him."

"I—go to him?" She gave a queer, uneven laugh. "Oh, Mark, what must you think of me? . . . That I'd break with first one man, then another, and then go back to the first one!" Her voice vibrated passionately. "Let me try to be honest and loyal once in my life!"

"You've been loyal all through—in your heart," he answered steadily. "Loyal to the man you love. . . . And infinitely kind to a man who loves you," he added, his tone oddly uneven. "I shall always have that for remembrance."

"Don't—ah, don't!" she implored. "You make me *ashamed*. . . ."

"You need not be. My dear, you've been trying to do the impossible—to crush down the thoughts of the man you love for the sake of another man you don't love. For my sake. And you've tried gallantly, generously. It is no shame to you that you've failed."

She remained miserably silent. There seemed nothing she could say. Presently she felt him take her hand in his and gently, but with quiet decision, he drew from her finger the slender circlet, with its single, big, square-cut emerald,

which he had given her as an engagement ring. For a minute he stood looking down at it as it lay in his palm, the expression of his face untranslatable. Then, with a quick gesture, he sent it spinning through the air, over the side of the deck. There was a momentary quiver of green fire as it flashed in the moonlight, then it dropped soundlessly into the sea and the quiet waters closed over it.

"You are quite free now," said Mark. "Free to go—to Brihou Island."

Her eyes came back to his face.

"You haven't understood," she answered wearily. "Kerry doesn't want me any longer."

He smiled.

"Try him," was all he said. "Unless"—swiftly, almost incredulously—"your pride stands in the way?"

"No." She shook her head. "Once—it might have done. Not now. I've no pride left, I think."

"Then you'll go?"

"Go?"—vaguely. "How can I go?"

"Nothing simpler," he said cheerfully. "To-night we put into Guernsey harbour, and early to-morrow morning—before anyone else is astir—the motor-launch can take you across to Brihou. The *Silver Butterfly* shall remain in harbour, ready to bring you and Lorimer back to England—with Kit and Nancy on board"—smiling whimsically—"to play propriety."

"But you?" she stammered. "Where would you go?"

"It's quite possible—though prosaic—to return to England by one of the Southampton boats," he answered. "Peggy and I will take that route."

"Peggy!" Patricia could well imagine Mrs. Bethune's reception of the news of her departure to Brihou Island.

Strown nodded.

"I'll manage Peggy," he said quietly. "Remember, the *Silver Butterfly* will remain at your disposal."

"Mark"—her eyes searched his face accusingly—"had

you planned all this when—when you proposed the cruise?”

“I’m afraid I had,” he admitted. “Only—don’t, for heaven’s sake, enlighten Peggy! I thought it wiser to manoeuvre her into thinking that the whole idea of the cruise was her own—not mine.”

Patricia’s hands went out to him impulsively.

“Mark, not one man in a thousand would have done what you’ve done!” she cried unsteadily. “Oh, my dear, why are you so illimitably good to me?”

“I’m being good to myself, actually,” he explained. “Your happiness matters to me more than anything else, and if I can compass that, I’m pleasing myself. So, you see, it’s pure selfishness on my part.”

“I see,” she said, smiling. But tears stood in her eyes. And later, when she lay wide awake in her cabin, staring at the patch of star-strewn sky visible through the open port-hole, there came to her mind the remembrance of an old fourteenth-century tale of a “*veray parfit gentil knight*.” It seemed that the twentieth century, too, had its counterparts of that “*parfit knight*” of long ago.

Patricia sat in the stern of the motor-launch as it danced over the sunlit water. They had passed Sark—Sark with the wonderful jade and sapphire sea that laps its steep sides—and now, not a mile ahead, she could discern Brihou—Kerry’s “handful of green acres on the top of a rock.”

Her heart was beating unevenly in her breast. Would he send her from him—a second time? No pride of hers should stand between them ever again. She had learned now that there can be no pride where love is. But she did not know whether Kerry would trust her. She had failed him once. Would he believe that she would never fail him again?

Presently the motor-boat throbbed to a standstill at a stone jetty which curved out from the side of a small cove,

shielding a miniature harbour from the seas. There was no habitation within sight, only the rocky, grass-grown cliffs intersected by a rough pathway which led upwards from the harbour. Rather fearfully Patricia set her feet upon the narrow, climbing path. A consciousness of intense solitude descended upon her, and a sudden fear knocked at the door of her heart. Perhaps Strown had been mistaken, after all, and Kerry had already left the island! Doggedly she pursued her way, upward and ever upward, until a sudden turn brought her out on to the summit of the island where, in the midst of a few cultivated fields, stood a small stone house. Very sturdy and four-square it looked, as though grimly defying the onslaught of the winds which swept round it in the winter and the burning suns that beat down upon it in summer.

For a moment Patricia paused. So this was Kerry's home! Her heart seemed to be beating in her throat as she scanned the adjacent fields in search of the familiar figure. But there was neither sight nor sign of any human being. And the door of the stone house stood carelessly open, as though the place were empty. The dread that Kerry might not be here, might have left the island, deepened almost into bitter certainty. But she would find out, make sure, before she returned to the *Silver Butterfly*—alone. She had a feeling that if she went back alone now, she would be alone for the rest of her life.

She pushed on towards the house, crossed a small field that intervened, and approached the open door by way of a short, flagged path which led directly to it. Immediately a low growl issued from within, followed by the patter of quick feet and a rush of something brown and shaggy-coated. Then the growling turned into a sudden joyful bark of recognition and she found Paddy, the Irish terrier, leaping up at her, greeting her with excited, quivering tail and warm pink tongue, and brown eyes that beamed an ecstatic

welcome. And then, looking up, she saw that someone had followed him out of the house. A tall figure was standing motionless in the doorway.

"Kerry!" The word came quiveringly from her lips, and she held out her hands appealingly.

"*You!*" he exclaimed. His voice was unbelievably harsh, and with a swift gesture he thrust her hands aside. "What are you doing—here?" He was burnt by the sun, but beneath the tan his face had whitened to the colour of dead ashes. "Why have you come?"

Her eyes searched the beloved face for a single sign of any softening or relenting, but there was none, and she shrank back, feeling suddenly that her errand had been in vain.

"Don't you want me?" she said tremulously. "Don't you want me any longer, Kerry?"

"Want you?" He laughed harshly. "Have I ever ceased to want you, I wonder! Only, you see, I've learned to do without what I want."

And then somehow the bitterness of his tone—that note which held the accumulated pain of months of loneliness and longing—told her what to do, what to say so that he should understand.

"You needn't—do without," she said. "Because I've come back to you—if you'll have me, Kerry."

For a moment he hesitated. He made a swift movement towards her. Then, as swiftly, drew back, squaring his shoulders.

"It's very good of you," he answered. "But I told you once before that I would accept no sacrifice from the woman I loved. And I meant it." The old arrogant ring had come back into his voice.

"But supposing—supposing it isn't a sacrifice—any longer?"

He stared at her incredulously.

"What do you mean?" he said. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Suddenly she smiled up at him. "Oh, Kerry dear, haven't you grown very slow at understanding? . . . I'm not offering to make a sacrifice now, because"—the words came in a rush—"because I want to be with you more than anything else in the world."

He caught her by the shoulders, pulling her to him, and stared down into her face, searching it as he had once searched it before. But this time she had no fear of what he might read there. She knew that he would find only that which he sought.

"Is that true—*true*?" he demanded hoarsely.

She nodded, voicelessly, and the next moment she felt his arms close round her, while his lips crushed down on hers in a kiss that held all the love and passion and thwarted longing of the empty months that were gone.

Presently, when those first perfect moments of reunion were over, she asked simply:

"When shall we go to Rhodesia, Kerry?"

He glanced down at her quizzically.

"Quite sure you want to go there?"

"Why, yes"—in surprise. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes, it is. But we're going to play level. We'll live part of the time on the farm, and part of the time—wherever you wish."

"But, my dear, you'd hate the civilized part! . . . I don't want any sacrifices, either, you know."

"Only—I should hate still more being anywhere where you were not, beloved. So, you see"—with a smile—"I shouldn't be making a sacrifice."

It was late in the afternoon when, with a supremely contented Paddy trotting closely at their heels, they made their way down towards the harbour. Before they began the descent of the steep cliff path, Patricia turned back to take a last look at the brave, sturdy little stone house where she had found her happiness. Somehow it seemed to her symbolical.

"Kerry," she said softly. "Do you remember telling me that it was only the big, primitive things that really counted? . . . 'Courage to face life, and love to sweeten it.' "

He put his hand under her chin and, turning her face up to his, laughed down at her.

"And haven't we found both?" he said.

THE END

